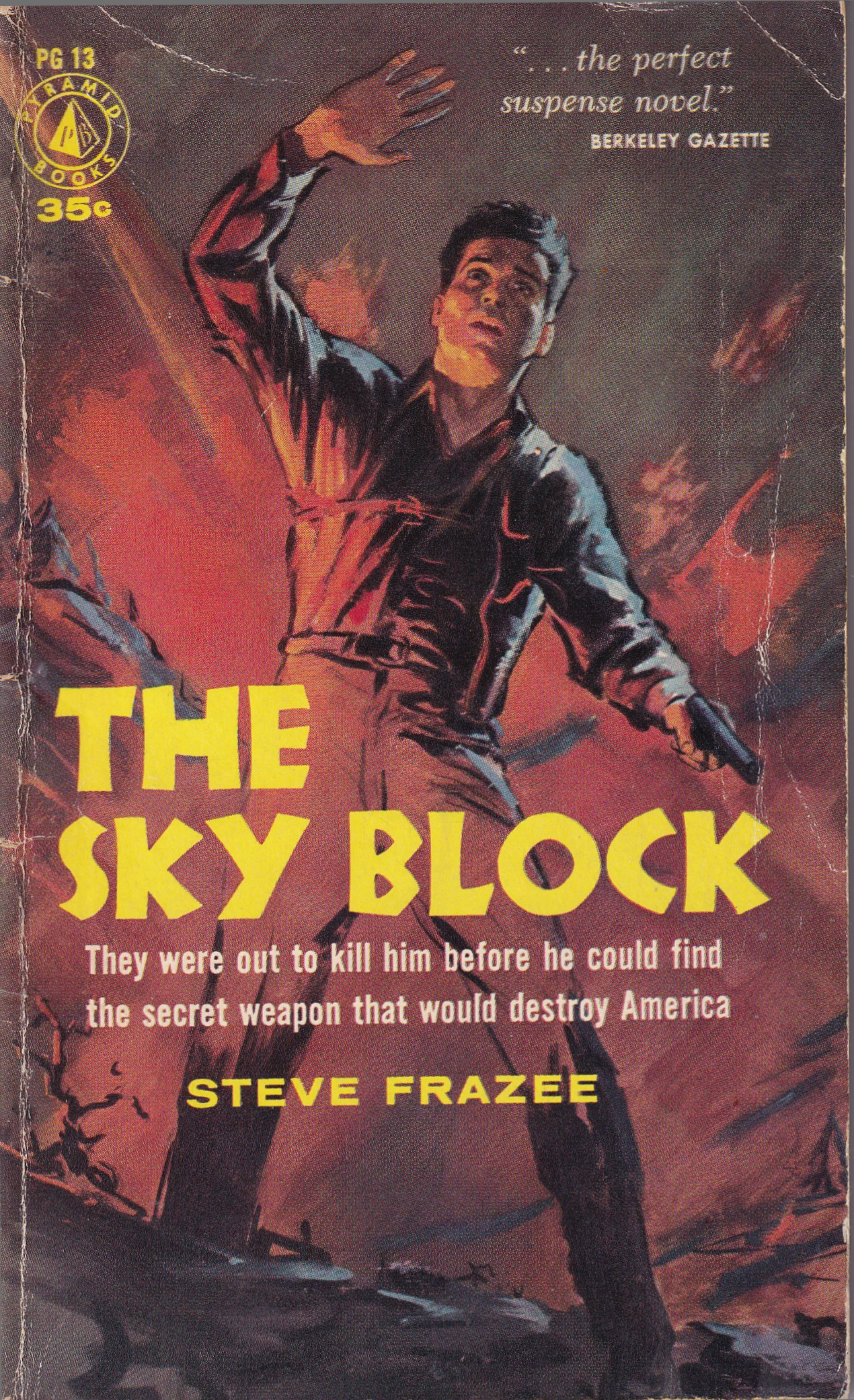

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THE SKY BLOCK

by Steve Frazee

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The Sky Block

CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE BOTTOM OF LIME CREEK CANYON the walls rose seven hundred feet, making a slot so narrow that a man looking up could see the stars in daytime. Running hard against masses of fallen rock, the river made a constant growling sound. Occasionally it swirled in dark pools against the undercut walls, giving an impression of unlimited depth.

It was all familiar to Platt Vencel. He liked it. And then he waded around a tangle of driftwood and saw the two men. The quick knowledge that they were waiting for him fell across his mind like a whip blow.

He hesitated. They watched him steadily. They were carrying unassembled fishing rods. There was only one creel between them. The boots they wore were not the boots of fishermen.

Vencel stopped, remembering that his cabin at the tourist camp had been searched every day since he had been here. Uneasily he watched the two men. They were fifty feet away, too far for speech above the noisy water. Their very immobility was disconcerting. Vencel was sure that if he turned and waded back down the canyon they would follow.

He killed another moment pretending to examine his flies. He was a tall, flat-muscled man with eyes as gray as the smoke of an aspen fire. He gave the impression of one who would be lean and straight-backed all his life.

At last he walked ahead, careful of his footing, favoring one leg. When he crossed a small patch of fine sand, level and easy to walk upon, his gait was still not even.

One of the two men was very slender and his blistered face was painful to look upon. Sun had given his skin a fiery, pulsing look. His lips were dry and swollen. His pale blue eyes held the expression of a man born uncomfortable, with no hope of improvement. He wore a fatigue cap too small for him. His rubber boots were too large. Over a skivvy shirt, the only garment that seemed to fit, he wore a plastic rain jacket. Even down here in the misty gloom he appeared to be steaming all the way from his heavy boots to the top of a long head plastered with colorless blond hair.

The second man was small and blocky, a trim, square-rigged man with the chest and shoulders of a welter-weight. His face was Indian dark, complimented by short black hair as thick and stiff as the bristles of a shoebrush. Even standing still there was an explosive look about him. He rubbed his palms down the sides of his pants and grinned.

It was a good grin, but there was still a tenseness in the man.

Vencel splashed close to them and stopped. "How's fishing?"

They let the question ride, with no pretense. The stocky little man said, "You're Platt Vencel?"

"Yes."

"Montgomery Speer." The little man put out his hand. For an instant his eyes showed a hard defensiveness as if he expected a smile or wisecrack about his name. His hand was unusually large for one his size. Vencel looked at it after he had shaken it.

The sunburned man said, "Jack White." His hand was long and slender and damp with sweat.

And now the three were silent, standing deep in the gloomy canyon with the growling water swirling at their feet. Once more Vencel was caught by an uneasy sensation. Somewhere on the highway far above the hard-working motor of a crawling truck came dimly.

"You used to live around here?" Speer asked.

Vencel nodded. "When I was a kid." There was scar tissue in Speer's eyebrows, little lumps of it around his mouth. A fighter at some time, Vencel thought. Probably pretty good yet.

"A man wants to see you, Vencel." White licked his swollen lips.

"Who?"

"Our boss." White smiled. "It's not as sinister at it may sound to you."

"Where is this boss of yours?"

White shook his head.

"Will you go with us?" Speer asked.

"Absolutely not," Vencel said. "Not on the basis of what you guys have told me."

White shrugged. Speer looked at Vencel intently, as if sizing up all points of resistance. The expressions of the two men were vastly different, but still they gave Vencel an impression of unity and determination that would not be stopped.

"You ought to come along," Speer said. "It's all right."

"Then tell me about it."

"Can't." Speer's eyes were flat and hard.

"That sounds cornball to me," Vencel said; but it did not. They were too intense. He kept wondering about the searching of his cabin.

On the highway a horn made a lonely, distant sound. Four thousand automobiles a day crossed Columbus Pass in summer, but that was in another world. Down here in the gloom of the deep canyon the water boomed over the rocks, and the walls were close and hard. Vencel never before had met anyone here. Speer and White kept watching him.

"How'd you find me?" Vencel asked.

White rubbed his nose. His pale eyes were steady above his gently moving fingers. "The fellow at the dump up there—Saunders. He said you fished down here."

All at once Okie Saunders, who ran the Gorge Inn, was a strong and friendly memory from the normal world. For the first time Vencel was aware of the water-borne chill running through the canyon depths. He had been standing still too long, he told himself.

"You want to go with us?" Speer asked.

"No."

Speer and White looked at each other.

"Maybe I would if I knew what it was all about."

"We can't tell you," White said. He was patient. Now he was feeling his burned cheekbone. "I can tell you this much now: If you don't go with us, you'll wind up at the same place later by other means."

"Will I?"

"You will," White said.

"Then I'll wait for the other means."

Neither Speer nor White moved. Vencel dumped his creel on rocks at the edge of the water. He began to clean the trout with a long-bladed knife so sharp that it seemed to project its cutting edge ahead of itself.

"If you go, you'll want to stop first at that tourist camp, won't you?" Speer asked. He was looking at White, not at the kneeling man.

"I sure would—if I went," Vencel said.

"Maybe you'll decide to go." Some formation high on the canyon walls caught Speer's eye. He moved several steps upstream, and stood there peering at the towering limestone.

Vencel picked up another trout. At first glance he thought it was a seltzer cartridge that dropped away from the side of the fish. He handled the object curiously. It was a tiny metal bottle with a screw cap. He knew it must have been in his creel all morning because it was covered with fish slime.

He was unscrewing the cap when White's foot cracked against his wrist and knocked the little bottle from his hand.

"Don't fool with that!"

White drove past Vencel to retrieve the metal tube. The commotion caused Speer to spin around. His hands came up in defensive poise. When he saw what White had snatched from the water, Speer said, "Oh!" in a long breath. He dropped his hands and splashed toward Vencel. "Now I know you'd better come with us, Vencel."

White held the bottle between his thumb and forefinger. "That must have been in your fish basket since sometime last night."

Vencel stared at White.

"You know what it is?" When Vencel did not answer, White said, "That's a jawlifter. Natural curiosity makes you unscrew the cap. There's a rod on it, hooked to a detonator. The rest is tetryl, a beautiful explosive. When it explodes your jaw is lifted up into your brain." White dropped the bottle into his pocket, and then took it out at once and made sure the cap was tight.

Every night Vencel had left his creel hanging on a nail outside his cabin. When he strapped it on again he had no reason for looking inside.

White said, "You'll live longer, Vencel, if you listen to us."

Anybody could have sauntered past Vencel's cabin and dropped that thing into the creel, including these two men, whoever they were; and maybe the bottle was a harmless piece of metal. For a few moments Vencel had been impressed but those moments were past now.

"It's no gag," Speer said. He looked at White. "This guy won't believe nothing, Jack."

White took the bottle from his pocket again. "That little charge will blow your face apart, Vencel. Somebody slipped it to you. We don't know why, but you may find out if you come along with us. We're not going to beg you anymore. Do you want to listen to us or not?"

"Go ahead and tell me."

"I don't mean listen to Speer and me. I mean the boss."

Vencel had always been prejudiced against pale eyes and pale hair. He did not trust White now, but he did begin to trust the man's intenseness—and there was a mystery here. He stared at the jawlifter in White's hand. He looked at the waiting expression of Speer's dark face.

"All right," Vencel said.

They reached the highway a half mile below Okie's place. Ahead, the ramparts of the continental divide were snagged into the sky. The greatest of them was Blue Peak, dead west. Cars whined past, going toward the valley, going up toward Columbus Pass, which lay a few miles south, or to the left, of square-topped Blue Peak.

The heat was a hot dry clamp. The shoulders of the highway were dusty, and the leaves of the aspens limp. It was the hottest summer Vencel had ever seen in the mountains. For weeks there had been no rain.

White flapped the sides of his plastic jacket to drive air against his body. His face was lobster red. Vencel began to remove his shirt, thinking of the coolness of Lime Creek Canyon. "This is the weirdest weather I ever saw," he said.

"Been around here long?" Speer asked.

"There was a town called Calcite where Okie's joint is now. I lived there when I was a kid."

"Nobody would ever know now there'd been a town there." Speer moved along on the balls of his feet.

They approached a light coupé pulled off to the side. Its open hood looked like a gigantic mouth gasping for breath. Steam was pounding the radiator cap and jetting into the dust through the overflow pipe. The fenders on the left side had suffered twice, once from being caved in, again from being ironed out, apparently by a sledgehammer mechanic.

A short, deep-chested young man with the expression of a frustrated bulldog was standing with one foot on the front bumper.

"Sort of hot, eh?" White asked pleasantly.

The motorist turned a dished, small-mouthed face toward the three men. "How far to water?" His voice was surly, as if they were responsible for his predicament.

"Straight ahead, about a half mile," Vencel said.

Speer pointed toward the canyon. "Or down there—and that's about a half mile, too."

The stranded motorist scowled at them as they walked on.

"It's like this," White said, "we're going fishing together someplace for a couple of days. You know us, say, from the army——"

"I was in the navy."

"All right. We were in the navy together. You promised us to show us where to catch some big fish, so now we're all going there."

Two days. Vencel did not like the sound of it. "That's what I say at the camp, huh?"

"You've got to have *some* excuse, don't you?" Speer began to unloosen his shirt.

"We left our car at the bridge above Okie's place," White said. "You won't need yours."

"I'd rather take it."

"Okay. We'll take them both then," White said. "For part of the way, at least."

When applied to Okie Saunders's place, "Inn" put a strain on an honest word. There was a filling station and a café, with the Saunderses' living quarters in a crazy superstructure above the kitchen. There were three slab cabins with plumbing in the aspens behind them, a slab garage that would hold one small automobile when all the junk was kicked into the corners, a homemade trailer that sat wearily in the aspens behind the café, and parts of junked cars strewn in the trees wherever there was room.

Okie Saunders was standing beside thirty-one hundred dollars' worth of maroon sedan, wiping his hands on a rag and shaking his head sorrowfully. "Fuel pump shot," he told a gray-haired tourist in a gaudy sport shirt.

The tourist, whose license proclaimed him a gentleman from Indiana, wiped sweat from his neck and stared doubtfully at Okie's two-by-four garage. "Got one?"

Okie looked thoughtful and continued to rub more grease from the rag into his hands. "I just might have a reconditioned pump to fit this model."

Vencel smiled. Okie had a washtub full of what he called reconditioned fuel pumps, removed from cars that had limped in with vapor locks which a little cold water would have cured. Reconditioning consisted of wiping the pumps off with a rag. Okie Saunders was quite adept at sizing up a tourist's ignorance of mechanics, and the Gorge Inn was well located to catch cars with vapor locks.

The maroon job would get a pump taken from another car of the same year and make; and the next sucker with the same kind of car would get the pump taken off the maroon job, all of which made fair business for Okie at prices that varied with individual degrees of ignorance concerning engines.

Okie was a loose-jointed, wrinkled man with a brown face and humorous, puckery eyes. He might have been fifty. He said he was sixty-two. He wore a thick crown of furry brown hair, cut short, inexpertly and high on the sides of his head, as if his wife had done the barbering, which indeed she had.

When not arguing with Mrs. Saunders about the amount of meat that should be left out of sandwiches, or chewing on Johnny Harper, the waiter and flunky in the café, Okie was fond of telling how his present eminence was due to a no-good truck that had collapsed "right there!"—where the two pumps stood—when he and the missus were on their way to the West Coast to go to work in a war plant.

The truck had sighed, gurgled and spraddled out hopelessly, although later Okie had managed to sell two hundred dollars' worth of parts off it. But when the collapse occurred Okie and his wife had been broke, so they camped in the last caving cabin that marked the site of the abandoned mining camp, and Okie went to work for an outfit cutting timber a few miles away.

One night the air went bad on a semi-trailer coming down the pass with a load of edged slabs. The tractor slewed, and the trailer jackknifed. A boomer broke and slabs went sailing from hell to breakfast. Okie gathered up enough of them to build a cabin of sorts, the one that Vencel was now renting.

The timber-cutting outfit finished their contract, so Okie worked for several months for the highway department, raising a stretch of fill above the high bridge up the pass. One night a car broke down, and the occupants walked into Okie's looking for a place to stay. Okie said he had a cabin to rent, which he did as soon as he and his wife moved out.

From then on Okie Saunders was in business.

He thrived on misfortune, making fast deals when tired cars broke down near his place. The homemade trailer, now serving as the flunky's quarters, he acquired when a jalopy could not pull it any farther up the pass. After the war he bought a weapons carrier that had fallen apart almost on his doorstep, repaired it, and used it as a tow truck to make money in winter when motorists ignored the warning, "Chains are advised on Columbus Pass."

Sometime during his rise Okie bought a tax title to the abandoned townsite. He was solid now, without a patch on his coveralls, which he changed whenever Mrs. Saunders exerted enough pressure.

Okie looked at the greasy rag he held. He stowed it carefully in his hip pocket and began to wipe his hands on the front of his coveralls; and then he saw Vencel and the others coming.

"I see you found him," Okie said to Speer. "How was the fishing?"

"You got to be a mountain goat to even get down where you sent us," Speer said. "And there ain't no fish.

But Vencel knows another place over the hill——"

"Don't fall for that somewhere-else story." Okie grinned. He looked at a cabin that needed renting. "Now you take it in the evening here above the high bridge——"

"We tried that, too," White said. "We've been camped up that way."

No revenue forthcoming from White and Speer, Okie turned back to the Indiana tourist. "I'll see if I got a fuel pump. It'll take a while, mister. You just as well have a bite to eat while you're waiting."

The tourist looked at Vencel. "One way or another, they get to you from the minute you back your car out of the garage." He started toward the café.

White glanced at the new sedan parked beside Vencel's cabin. "Is that your car, Vencel?" There was a pushing in the casual question, as if White wanted to waste no time in leaving.

Vencel nodded. "What's the hurry?"

White bounced the metal bottle in his hand, looking steadily at Vencel.

"I'm not so sure that thing will go off," Vencel said.

"Finding out the hard way wouldn't leave you anything to worry about." Speer's tone was flat.

Again, as in the canyon, they waited for Vencel, studying him, regarding him as a piece of merchandise—or cold meat. It was hard to say which. And now Vencel's decision to go with them rested uneasily. Damn it, he should have found out more about this business. A man just did not drive away with two strangers, not knowing where he was headed, without leaving some kind of anchor behind.

"I'll leave the fish," Vencel said.

Speer and White walked beside him to the café. Two middle-aged women, evidently from the maroon sedan, were drinking milk at the counter. Johnny Harper, the waiter, was setting a too-full cup of coffee before the Indiana man. The coffee slopped over. Harper stabbed at it with a towel, bumped the cup, and spilled more liquid which ran across the counter and fell in the lap of the tourist. The gentleman from Indiana sighed helplessly. He glanced out at the garage, with the expression of one who knew he was going to get it from that quarter also.

Harper mumbled an apology. He glanced without interest at Vencel. During his week at Okie's, Vencel had not become well acquainted with the waiter, who never heard a question until it was asked twice. Harper was a good-looking man, with the fresh, solid appearance of an athlete, but he was awkward and his mouth was vague, as if he tried to do his thinking with his lips and could not make them function.

He could remember one order at a time. More than that confused him, but since Mrs. Saunders heard everything in the kitchen anyway, she managed to keep both the cooking and the orders straight, sometimes even coming in from the kitchen to join in the discussion about who had ordered what.

She peered around the partition now. She was a ponderous woman with a coal-skuttle jaw and a mustache that was always discolored from depilatories. Her upper arms were brown speckled and powerful, big enough to fill an eight-inch stovepipe.

She could cook. Customers who ate her cooking once came back for more; and truck drivers, who do not necessarily stop where the food is good, did stop at Okie's place a great deal.

She said, "Back so quick, Mr. Vencel? The fishing must have been better than usual."

"Fair." Vencel went into the kitchen and White stayed at his heels. He helped Vencel wash the fish, dry them, and put them in the refrigerator. "I'm taking a couple of friends over the pass for some lake fishing," Vencel said. "I'll be gone two days."

"We'll miss you," Mrs. Saunders said. She had tried to mother Vencel, and she had protected him from some of Okie's chiseling. "You'll need a good meal before you go."

"Just a hamburger and a cup of coffee," Vencel said.

Mrs. Saunders looked at White. "That's what your friend looks like he's been living on."

"Nothing makes me fat," White said. "Hadn't we better get moving, Vencel?"

Once more the urgency in White's manner disturbed Vencel. He wondered what would happen if he said he had changed his mind about going. He introduced White to Mrs. Saunders. The name might slip her mind, but she would not be likely to forget the sunburned look of him and the pale eyes and hair. White's quick side glance at Vencel showed that he understood the maneuver.

Harper was standing in the kitchen doorway, scratching his chest. Vencel and White had to bump against him on their way out before he moved. "Excuse me," Harper said. He put a glass of water before Speer, who was sitting at the counter. There was already one glass of water before him.

White and Speer sat beside Vencel while he ate.

One of the women asked Harper, "Rest rooms?"

The waiter scratched his chest. "Men's or women's?" he asked, and then he blinked and said hastily, "To the left behind the cabins, lady."

Okie was working on the maroon sedan when the three men walked out. Vencel stopped beside him and said, "I'm going fishing with Mr. White and Mr. Speer for two days. If I'm not back by then call Burley O'Leary at Midway and tell him I'll make that meeting a little later."

"Sure," Okie said. Then he looked up and said, "Huh?" His puckery eyes gave Speer and White sharp scrutiny. "Sure, Vencel, I'll tell Burley. You keeping the cabin?"

"Yeah. I want you to put a padlock on it, Okie."

"I'm pretty busy. I'd have to buy a padlock for about a buck, and——"

"I've got a rod I'm leaving there that's worth seventy bucks," Vencel said.

"The heck!" Okie was studying Speer and White. "I used to cut a cane pole right out of the field. . . . All right, Vencel, I'll see that your stuff is taken care of." Okie watched the three men walk away.

When they were in front of the cabin and Vencel was rooting in his pocket for the key, Speer said, "Burley O'Leary is the sheriff of this county. You're a suspicious guy, Vencel."

"I found a jawlifter in my creel."

"I mean about going with us."

"What if I say I've changed my mind?"

Speer smiled. He might have smiled that way in the ring, Vencel thought, when he was closing in to finish a groggy opponent. "You want to find out about that jawlifter, don't you?"

"You two could have dropped it in my creel."

"We could have," White said. "But we didn't. Is that the nail where you hang the basket?"

"I never said I hung it on any nail, did I?"

White shrugged. "Okay. We've seen it there then. Simple. Somebody drops in the bottle, you find it at the creek when you're cleaning fish, open it—a nice clean kill a mile or so from here."

"Not nice, not clean," Speer said. "Open the door, Vencel."

"Courtesy, Speer," White said. "Remember how the boss said to handle things? You don't *have* to go, Vencel." White rubbed his cheekbone. "Not right now, but you will later—if you're still alive later."

They went inside. Vencel walked across the uneven floor to an aluminum case that held a spare fly rod. He looked at the cap closely. It moved easily when he twisted. The first two times the place had been searched the prowler had jammed the cap, not knowing about an irregularity in the threading. He had learned later on, but he still had not noticed the two tiny pencil marks that indicated the position in which Vencel had left the cap this morning.

Once more the cabin had been searched.

"Has this big clam-mouth deal got anything to do with the fact that somebody has been pawing over my gear every day I've been here?" Vencel asked.

"It might," Speer said.

Vencel jammed clothing into a duffel bag. He locked the door and threw the key down the hill. Speer picked up the fishing gear they had left outside, and the three men got into the front seat of Vencel's car.

The Indiana sedan was running now. Okie was wiping his hands on his coveralls. He wore the expression of a man who had made a fast ten dollars. Harper stood in the café doorway, digging at the hollow of his breastbone. In time he could dig a hole there, Vencel thought.

While Vencel waited for a sudden spurt of traffic to clear, the light coupé he had seen down the road churned into the parking area. The dish-faced owner got out of it and walked away as if he never wanted to see the car again.

Speer laughed. "No reconditioned fuel pump will help that pot."

The high bridge at the head of Lime Creek Canyon was only a short distance above Okie's place. It crossed plunging water that came mainly from Grizzly Lake, at the foot of Blue Peak. A few hundred yards beyond the bridge White said, "Turn here."

Vencel stopped. "That's an old logging road that goes nowhere."

"That's where our car is," White said.

Vencel studied the borrow pit. If there was a car up the logging road it must have been assembled there because no marks showed on the shoulder of the highway or in the pit to prove that any automobile had ever left the highway here.

Vencel said, "I'll wait for you to get your car."

The white lines at the corners of White's eyes folded into his sunburn when he grinned. "Would you? You'd turn and scoot back to Okie's to call the law. Of course there're no tracks here. We didn't come this way."

The only other way they could have reached the logging road was by skidding off the mountain from the Grizzly Lake road, and that had been washed out before Vencel was born.

Speer sighed. He was getting impatient.

"Let him make up his mind," White said.

If they had wanted a good place to hide a car, the road to the Lucky Dog mine, which took off close to the high bridge, would have been a better place because it had been made passable by a logging outfit during the war. Vencel knew the abandoned trace ahead. He had walked it many times as a shortcut to the Grizzly Lake road. It petered out about a mile west, near a tower of the power line that leaped from structure to structure on its way over the range.

"Your car must have wings," he said. He drove down the outslope. The road was bumpy and twisting. The bumper pushed over slender aspens that rattled along the bottom of the car. After a quarter of a mile Vencel stopped. Just ahead was a stretch of ground that had always been deep with mud from spring seep.

"Good enough," White said. "We're out of sight." He and Speer got out, waiting while Vencel locked the sedan. He took his duffel bag.

They skirted the boggy stretch of road. There was less water in it than Vencel had ever seen. He looked at the sky. No rain in sight. The air was hot and dry, as if they were walking in desert country. From habit he pulled an aspen leaf from a branch and started to chew it. There was a half-formed brittleness in the leaf, and this was midsummer.

The jeep itself was no great surprise, but the color, the numbers and the regulation equipment on it caused Vencel to stare at his companions in surprise.

"*Lieutenants* Speer and White," Speer said. "U.S. Army engineers."

White removed the plastic jacket. He wadded it up and hurled it into the back of the jeep. "From now on when Colonel Catron makes a private eye of me, he'd better furnish clothes suitable to my rank and sunburn!" He took a regulation blouse from the back seat and eased into it gingerly.

"What was the big secret?" Vencel asked.

"Security," White said. "Yours, mainly. Let's go."

Vencel looked doubtfully at the mountainside. Speer drove. They went up with all four wheels throwing public domain and taxpayers' rubber into the air. They came out on what had been the old Grizzly Lake wagon road. Now it was dozed and bladed into a passable road for trucks.

"When did this happen?" Vencel asked.

"Three days ago," White said.

"I should have heard the dozers. I guess there's too many big trucks on the highways these days. What's going on at the lake?"

"Explosion tests," White said. "We're measuring the shattering effects of T.N.T. on limestone to determine how far underground to put vital plants—and so forth."

"Yeah." Vencel looked down the mountain. He saw the shine of metal at Okie's place.

Speer laughed. "This guy won't buy anything."

"Colonel Catron will give you the dope," White said.

"The boss. Colonel Julius Caesar Catron," Speer laughed again, and White gave him a fleeting look of annoyance.

Speer pushed the jeep hard toward the fourteen-thousand-foot peaks that backed Grizzly Lake. Blue Peak, being closer, seemed higher than the rest. Motion gave but small coolness to the flow of air. A weird summer indeed, Vencel thought again. He had seen light falls of snow occasionally at this altitude in other years—in July.

They broke over a frontal ridge that sloped down to Grizzly Lake in a basin at the foot of Blue Peak. Some fifty years ago the city of Midway had increased the storage capacity of the natural lake by building an earthen dam. The lake was at high level now. During average years the gates would not be opened to release reserve water until at least a month from now.

The sight of old landmarks brought back to Vencel memories of his fishing days at the lake. Once there had been huge trout here, but years of dynamiting had killed their food; and since the lake had been heavily overstocked, the fish had starved to death.

No fisherman wasted time on Grizzly Lake these days.

The army was here now.

Vencel saw a huge raft in the middle of the lake. On a level spot above the inlet, where in normal times it was too wet to camp, he saw the Stars and Stripes on a pole above tents and vehicles. Men were lounging in a roped enclosure that looked like a small corral.

Speer stopped the jeep before a headquarters tent. From inside came the sound of crisp voices. One said, "No, no!" Another said, "Yes," quite flatly as if it were the final word. And then there was a silence that was as heavy with disagreement as the words.

A moment later a hawk-nosed man in civilian clothes came from the tent. His eyes were protruding, commanding, insolent. His large bald head was tanned the color of a weathered block of cypress, but the face itself was sallow. He was bitterly angry. He looked sharply at Vencel and then he strode away.

"Brutus is an honorable man," White murmured.

"Who is he?" Vencel asked.

"John Z. Sillcott," White said, "one of our foremost civilians on this hassle."

"What hassle?"

White pointed toward the tent. He went inside, his clumsy boots flopping, his skivvy shirt hanging over his belt. In a minute or two he came out and said, "Colonel Catron is anxious to see you, Vencel." White got back in the jeep. Speer spun it around and drove toward the motor pool.

Men with a mission accomplished, Vencel thought. He walked into the headquarters tent.

CHAPTER TWO

COLONEL CATRON did not seem anxious to see anyone. From behind a field desk he stared coldly at Vencel. He was a small, pink-faced man with a streak of gray in wavy black hair that was too long to suit Vencel's taste in army engineers. His hands were plump and short fingered. Except for his eyes he might have been a second-class drama critic in a sweat-soiled shirt.

Suddenly Vencel realized the man was bone tired.

Catron's rising was a small explosion. He came around the desk to shake hands. He was taller than Vencel had thought, perhaps five feet six. "I'm glad you decided to come, Vencel. Sit down." He watched Vencel settle into a canvas chair as if the act were a key to character, and then he sat down himself.

"I'm wondering what would have happened if I hadn't decided to come."

"So am I. I told Speer and White to bring you here." For a moment the expression of the colonel's eyes was like the reflection of light from blue ice. "I told them also to be courteous." Catron shifted gently in his chair. "How well do you know the country around here?"

"Fairly well, I think."

The thunder of a four-engined plane filled the tent. Until the wash of noise receded the two men sat watching each other intently. It was a big plane. It must have cleared the granite south of Blue Peak with little room to spare, Vencel thought.

"You lived in Calcite until you were thirteen?"

Vencel nodded.

"You're a mining engineer. Last month you sold out a soda spar mine you developed near Midway. You were taking a vacation fishing in the canyon below the high bridge. Any particular reason for choosing that spot?"

"Yes. I catch fish there. Every summer since the war I've spent a few days fishing Lime Creek Canyon. Let's assume, Colonel, that you know everything about me. What I want to know——"

"That's natural," Catron said. "You want to know a lot of things. We'll get to that later. You say you know this country fairly well. Where's the deepest bore into Blue Peak?"

"Unless there's been development in the last ten years, the Kingsley tunnel on the other side is the deepest."

"How deep?"

"Around seven thousand feet," Vencel said.

"How far would you say it is from the head of the middle fork of Agate Creek to East Lime Creek?"

"Two and a half miles the short way over the ridge."

"Good trail?" Catron might have been a fisherman planning a trip.

"No trail when I was last there."

The colonel nodded. Strain lay in the fine lines of his face, in the sag of flesh under his eyes, but the eyes were scouts for a sharp intelligence that was not tired. "What's the deepest workings on this side of Blue Peak?"

The question was almost like the others, but the careful balance of Catron's tone had tipped toward tension. Vencel knew that Catron was no longer testing his knowledge of the country but seriously digging for information.

"The St. George, maybe a thousand feet. The Uncle Sam mine in Clover Basin, maybe nine hundred feet. The Ives and the Golconda at about six hundred feet, the——"

Another heavy plane burst over the front ridge and filled the tent with its bellowing. Vencel half expected to hear a crash somewhere on the range, but the second plane cleared the mountains and droned away.

"Go on," Catron said.

Vencel named five other abandoned mines on the east face of Blue Peak. He sensed he was telling the colonel nothing that he did not know already.

"How about workings right around the lake?"

Vencel lit a cigarette. He stalled, making sure by the rising tension in Catron's eyes—this was where it was, whatever it was. He said, "There's no uranium here, Colonel."

"We know that, Vencel. Please answer the question."

Vencel had investigated every old hole within a mile of where he now sat. On the front ridge there were at least thirty shallow prospect shafts. Along the shore line of the natural lake, now under fifteen feet of water, there were seven or eight short tunnels, all at one time the property of old Gust Olson, who had never done a foot of work on any of them, other than fitting all the portals with plank doors and huge locks.

When Vencel was a kid in Calcite, miners said that old Gust was closer to metal all the time than any prospector in the hills: a silver plate in his head, the result of a premature dynamite blast; gold in his teeth; and lead in his pants. On top of that he was called crazy by some people.

Gust had been harmless. His fits of temper were always released in talk. During the winters he had stayed in

Calcite, living on the bounty of miners. In the summer he displayed rich samples of gold ore that had not come from the Blue Peak district but they were always good for a grubstake from credulous investors who wandered into Calcite.

Having secured his living for the summer, Gust then returned to Grizzly Lake and fished. He could not work the tunnels when they were under the water of the artificial lake. When the lake was drained in late summer, Gust always said there was too little time to do any real work before winter, so he fished some more—all of which caused some people to remark that he was far from crazy.

He had taught Vencel all there was to know about fishing Grizzly Lake. Now, here in the tent, the memory of the old man came up most pleasantly, for it was also the memory of boyhood's happy times.

"Well?" Catron said. "How about workings here at the lake, Vencel?"

Vencel shook his head. "Seven or eight little holes, none more than fifteen feet deep as I remember."

Catron was staring hard. "You're sure about their depth?"

"A few feet one way or another, yes."

"That's a sloppy statement for an engineer."

Nettled, Vencel said, "I had no reason to measure the tunnels. When the lake is drained you——"

"How did you guess the length of the tunnels? When you were a kid around here, there were heavy doors and locks on all of them."

"You know plenty, Colonel. Why do you need me?"

Catron's tight expression did not change. "Please answer me."

"They took the old guy who owned the claims away to the county home. Some careless fisherman burned his cabin. People tore the doors off his tunnels and used them for firewood and rafts. That's when I remember seeing the inside of the tunnels."

Catron's face was still cold. "Records show assessments done on those claims for thirty years by a man named Olson. The claims were held as a group, which means he could have done all his work on one tunnel. If he complied with the law he should have made at least seventy feet each year——"

"You're way off the beam," Vencel said. "He never did anything but file affidavits of labor. The doors were strictly barriers so no one could say Gust hadn't done his work. The portals are right at shore line on the natural lake, right at deep water. When miners used to rib old Gust, he always said he'd dumped his waste into the lake."

"You're sure he never did any work?"

The colonel's insistence checked the quick answer Vencel started to give. After a time he said, "I'm reasonably sure Gust never did a pound of work."

"I see." Catron was motionless. Fatigue was a stain across his face, a grayness underlying the pink skin. "Do you know of any limestone caves in this region?"

"Near the lake?"

"Anywhere."

"There are some small potholes down in Lime Creek Canyon, behind Okie's place."

"No big caves down there?"

Vencel shook his head.

"You wrote a monograph once about lime and granite contacts of this region, Vencel. You mentioned in it a cave under Calcite."

That special paper, written when Vencel thought he was smart. He studied Catron, realizing in full now how thoroughly his background had been investigated, appreciating the entire force of the colonel's determination.

"There's a cave under Calcite, yes. I was never in it. Before I was born the only entrance was blocked by manure thrown over the bank from a stable. I do know that there was a big spill of rock in it one night when I was a kid. The jar knocked half the doors in town out of plumb."

"All right," Catron said. "That settles a point."

"What else do you want to know?"

"Nothing—for the moment."

"Why did you bring me here?" Vencel asked.

The colonel's face was partly obscured by cigarette smoke. "You know the country. I'm convinced of it now. You've been helpful in giving me data on some of these old workings. I think you can help me some more, so I'm going to ask you to stay a few days, if you can."

Catron's evasion irritated Vencel. He said, "I'm not staying."

"I'm asking you to." It was an order.

"I'm not in the army, Colonel."

Catron leaned forward. "These explosion tests are important, Vencel. You know as well as I do what this country faces. There will be a day, perhaps sooner than we think, when we'll have to put vital factories in safe places. It seems to me that anyone who can help——"

"Nuts! Let's skip the double talk about explosion tests, Colonel."

Catron was quiet for a moment. His expression did not change. "I wish I could." His fighter's eyes bored into Vencel. "But I can't. Will you stay here a week?"

"If I knew what was going on——"

"If I could tell you, I would. I'll give you my word that this country, the United States of America, needs what you may know about this region more than any help you can give will ever be needed again. You——"

"I thought flag waving went out with the new army, Colonel."

Catron went white in an instant. The skin on his forehead appeared parchment tight and a hellish rage sparked in his eyes. He pushed straight up from his chair and kicked it away from him. The contrast between his appearance and the calmness of his voice amazed Vencel.

"Talk like that annoys me, Vencel. You say those things lightly, you and your kind. I mean your generation and all the young squirts who seem to think they're the only ones trapped in a world that isn't what it used to be. Maybe you don't mean it, but you say those things just the same.

"Flag waving, yes. I hope I die waving it. I spent a lifetime in this army because I love that flag. If that sounds worn-out and old-fashioned to you, then it illustrates what I mean. When you talk of your country to me, talk of something you love or keep your mouth shut. Don't brush over your feelings with any cheap remarks."

Catron righted his chair and sat down again. The color returned to his face, but his eyes were still cold as awl points. His burst of feeling had made his fatigue terribly apparent.

"I don't expect a briefing from the top drawer," Vencel said, "but I'd still like to know why I'm here."

"For one thing, your security. Alive, you're worth something to us."

"Like a captive scientist, eh?"

"Yes," Catron said. "Like a captive scientist. But you have an obligation to stay here."

Lieutenant White came in quietly. He was in uniform. His face was smeared with salve. "Raven wants to see you right away, sir."

"Naturally." The colonel glanced from White to Vencel, then back again. "Take care of Vencel, White."

There was nothing to do but walk out when White nodded toward the outside. At the door Vencel looked back. Colonel Catron was rubbing his forehead with his hand. He looked like a tubby little man who had exhausted himself trying to accomplish something he could not handle.

The civilian waiting outside had a solidly fleshed brown face. His eyes were brown. They darted at Vencel with probing warmth. He was a chunky man dressed neatly in brown slacks and shirt. His hair was also brown. It had retreated to an orderly front halfway back on his skull, leaving an unlittered field before it.

He looked Vencel over quickly, touching here, digging hard there, and Vencel received the impression that a considerable pile of data had been stowed away in a few moments.

The colonel's voice came strongly from inside. "Come in, Raven." He did not sound tired.

Walking past the rows of tents, Vencel asked, "Who's the quick brown man?"

"Clement Raven," White said.

"An explosives engineer, I suppose?"

"I don't doubt that Raven has dealt with explosives a time or two, sure enough."

"You and Catron will never win a radio quiz program, will you?"

White smiled.

The grass where the camp set was turning brown, and the sod that held it was cracking. Always before the grass had been knee-high here. In the morning it had held a dew to drown a tomcat. Vencel turned suddenly to look at the lake. It was lower than he had thought at first. He saw activity on the raft. A gasoline winch was running, and there was other gear on the raft.

"What's going on out there?"

"They're fishing, I guess," White said.

"I was called a while ago for making a smart answer."

"I'm doing the best I can, Vencel. I thought the colonel might tell you more than he apparently did." There was a note of apology in White's tone.

Vencel looked up at Blue Peak. A dirty yellowish light lay along the crests; like cyclone weather, he thought.

They passed a roped enclosure. The men that Vencel had thought were lounging when the jeep came over the front ridge were intent on weather instruments set on heavy tables. Vencel recognized a wind vane, a barometer, and a sounding balloon being readied for launching. Two sentries were standing duty.

A little farther on there were two large trailers filled with radio equipment. The radiomen were working in their skivvy shirts.

"Do you mind being quartered with Speer and me?" White asked. "It's either there or with Sillcott's bunch, and he's a surly character."

Being quartered. That was a polite way of putting it. Vencel was in the United States in the middle of a unit of the American army. He was a civilian who did not know the reason he was here, although he had come voluntarily. He knew now that he was under detention as surely as if he had been placed in jail for a civil offense.

"Two days?" he asked.

"Unless you decide to stay longer."

They walked on slowly.

"Does Catron always blow his top when anyone speaks lightly of patriotism?" Vencel asked.

"Damn right! He really believes in things like Valley Forge and John Paul Jones; it isn't just talk with him."

They approached the motor pool. Two mechanics in sweat-darkened fatigues were working on the tractor of a low-boy trailer. One of them said, "Hi, Lieutenant. So this is the fine cool mountain vacation you promised us."

"Sure," White said. "What else would you call it?"

Vencel said, "Didn't you boys get nervous, riding up that road with all the T.N.T.?"

"All the T.N.T. we've brought up here so far wouldn't make a Wac nervous," the mechanic said. "When do we start the tests, Lieutenant, or are we on another stall?"

"There are preliminaries," White said.

"Yeah." The mechanics resumed their work. White and Vencel walked on.

"I imagine the colonel will talk to you again, Vencel. It would be——" Something at the lake caught White's attention.

A rubber boat with an outboard motor was bouncing in from the raft. Vencel squinted at a grotesque figure on the float itself. "Have you got a diver there?"

White nodded.

"Not that I expect an honest answer, but what the hell are you looking for in the bottom of Grizzly Lake?"

"I'll give you an honest answer," White said. "We don't know."

"This is the army, all right."

The rubber boat came in to shore. A man leaped out and started trotting toward the camp. White pushed his thumb over his shoulder. "Third tent up from here, Vencel. Speer is there." He began to walk rapidly toward the headquarters tent.

Instead of going toward his quarters, Vencel followed White. The altitude had slowed down the man running from the lake. White beat him to the tent and went inside.

Vencel heard the colonel say crisply, "My orders allow no delay on that part of the operation, Raven."

"Neither do mine," Raven said. "However——"

Catron said, "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I think they've found something in the lake, sir. A messenger is coming on the double."

The three men were outside when the messenger, an enlisted man, arrived. He was panting. "Major Arbaugh wants to know if you can come out to the raft right away, sir."

"Come on, White, Raven." Catron ignored Vencel. He said to the messenger, "Find Mr. Sillcott and tell him to come to the landing immediately."

"He's waiting there already, sir," the enlisted man said.

Catron grunted. "Smells things a mile away." He strode toward the lake with Raven and White at his side. After a moment Vencel followed.

Sillcott was already in the rubber boat, a sour look on his face, his bald head gleaming brownly. He did not speak when the others loaded in. The enlisted man shoved the boat off. White kicked the motor over. Vencel was left standing with the soldier on the shore.

"What have they got out there?" Vencel asked.

"Hell, I don't know. Nobody knows what's going on since we started here."

Except for the backwash of the outboard on the rubber raft the lake lay as if frozen. It was about three quarters of a mile long and a half mile wide, and it lay in a dog-leg with the dam out of sight around a shoulder of the frontal ridge.

The boat reached the raft, and a tall man reached out to help the occupants aboard. There was a conference. Then Catron went over to the diver standing near an iron ladder. The diver made slow descriptive motions with his arms. A man in fatigues changed something on the end of a cable running through an end sheave of a boom that stuck over the end of the raft. The rattle of steel was a clear hard sound.

A diving compressor began to *tunk* sturdily. The diver swung around on the ladder and went down. Cable began to play out over the end sheave.

At once exasperated and intrigued, Vencel watched from the shore. The enlisted man sprawled out on the sand and covered his face with his cap. "What's your line?" he asked. "I mean, how do you fit in around here?"

"I don't know," Vencel said.

"You fit just right then."

About twenty minutes later the diver came up. He stood on the raft with his wet suit shining darkly. Two men began to unscrew the bolts on his helmet. A voice came testily, "And don't scrape his nose again!"

Vencel watched the tilting of the big raft when the winch took a strain. Lazy little waves ran from the float in all directions. Sillcott stood close to the boom, leaning out to watch the straight line of the wire rope that was bringing something up.

An excitement that was hard to analyze took hold of Vencel. He guessed it was because there is a mystery in anything that comes from dark to sunlight out of the depths of water.

Something broke the surface of the lake. The winch operator cut the gas and made his lift most slowly. Water poured in silver streams from the interior and sides of a boxlike object about as large as a desk.

"That's the box of an old mining tramcar, without the trucks," Vencel said. It, or one like it, had set for years near Gust Olson's cabin.

The enlisted man sat up. He took one brief look and lay down again. "That's interesting, ain't it?"

Vencel glanced up the hill to where Olson's cabin had been. The bare spot was still there and two towering spruce trees, now fire-killed. The tramcar was gone. If that was it hanging from the boom, someone had gone to a lot of work just to see a splash.

Sillcott crowded against the men swinging the boom by hand to land the car on the raft. He looked inside when the car was landed right side up, stepped back quickly, and then went forward again.

So much for the big mystery of Grizzly Lake, Vencel thought. He started up the hill. Catron called his name. "I'm sending the boat in. Come out here."

Major Arbaugh was a lean, grizzled man. The long creases in his cheeks looked like scar furrows. There was grease on his shirt, a smudge of it on his chin. He was more typical of the men who wore the castles than Catron, Vencel thought. The major gave Vencel sharp scrutiny.

The raft seemed bigger once Vencel was on it. It was made of three layers of dead timber decked with two-inch boards, powered by large outboards on the stern. Near the bow was a well over which two men with headphones sat. There was a canvas doghouse aft, diver's equipment, the gasoline winch and other gear that Vencel did not recognize.

He would have gone to the tramcar at once, but Catron stopped him. "When you were a kid around here, do you recall the unexplained disappearance of anyone?"

"Sure. About every two months some mining-stock promoter used to disappear."

"I'm serious," Catron said.

Vencel shook his head. "I don't recall that anyone ever disappeared around Calcite when I was a kid."

Catron motioned toward the tramcar.

In the bottom of it lay the dark brown bones of a skeleton. Galvanized wire had been laced across the top of the car. Most of it was rusted through.

CHAPTER THREE

"SOMEBODY DISAPPEARED," Catron said.

Vencel said, "Ten years ago, the last time I was here, this car was up there on the hill where Gust's cabin used to be."

Catron cocked his head. "Ten years ago?"

Vencel nodded.

From near the well Sillcott said, "I mentioned, Catron, that there is no evidence the metal has been under water as long as you insisted. In any event, it has nothing to do with our problem." His voice was remote and disgusted and indicated that everyone aboard the raft was a bungler, except Sillcott.

Major Arbaugh lifted the skull. He traced his finger around a small hole in the frontal lobe. It was too large for a bullet hole, too symmetrical to have been made by any kind of crushing impact. He tilted the skull. "It looks like those two missing front teeth have been knocked out. Look at the splintering of the jaw."

All at once Vencel was sickened by a knowledge of something as sure as if he had seen it happen. He took the bones from the box and began to search the bottom, and after a while he found it: a small, gently cupped piece of thin metal.

"What is it?" Raven asked. He pushed in, his brown eyes alert and probing. He took the disk from Vencel's hand and stared at it with fierce concentration. He glanced at the skull and said, "Oh!" And then he put the piece of metal into his pocket.

"What about it?" Catron asked impatiently.

Vencel took the skull from Major Arbaugh. He laid it on the deck with the rest of the bones, trying to place it where it belonged. He realized how senseless the gesture was, but he said bitterly, "Leave the man alone, why don't you?" He walked across the raft to the rubber boat and got into it and sat there staring up at Blue Peak.

The unhealthy light still lay across the summits. Dark timber ran out in an uneven fringe at timber line. The great slide-rock channel came down from the gray face clear to the lake. Utter stillness was on the water now, and it was scarcely cooler out here than on the shore. An eerie sensation touched Vencel, something cold and frightening that came partly from man's heritage of fear of the unnatural, and partly from his thoughts about the skeleton, once a man that he had known well.

The boat bumped and water slopped against it when Colonel Catron stepped in. Raven was coming quickly across the raft, but Catron shoved the boat away.

"Just a minute," Raven said.

"I'll handle it." Catron started the outboard and sent the boat toward shore. The enlisted man waded out to beach it.

Vencel and Catron walked up the hill together. Out on the raft Raven was calling for the boat to come back. A moment later Major Arbaugh yelled an order, and Vencel heard the outboard explode into action.

"You know who that was we dredged up, don't you?" Catron asked.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"What's the difference?"

"Let's go over to this log and sit down," Catron said. "Raven won't like this but to hell with that. I've got every department but the Bureau of Statistics in my hair on this job. I'll do what I see fit until I'm relieved, and I don't mind telling you that I'm likely to be relieved."

They sat down on a log in the open. Catron glanced behind him casually. He rubbed his fingers across his eyes, and then he straightened his shoulders quickly as if he had been caught in an act of weakness. He pointed his finger like a pistol barrel at Blue Peak.

"Somewhere in there is an electronic apparatus of some kind that we've never heard of. I can't explain it and neither can Sillcott"—he said the name like a curse—"and neither can the rest of the electronics hot shots.

"The meteorologists and all the rest of the boys are arguing about mesons and thermals and electrical energizing and Simpson's Theory—and a lot of other things that an ignorant engineer like me can't hope to understand. They agree on one thing: that radio, or whatever it is, is wrecking the weather."

A shock that Vencel tried to twist into disbelief coiled tight inside him. He did not want to believe, but he looked at the dirty color above Blue Peak, at the parched grass around him. All at once it seemed twice as hot as it had been before.

"It's a hell of a thing!" Catron said. "What have you heard about parts of the Midwest?"

"Drought."

"You haven't heard one tenth of it. The wheat and corn in Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska—and parts of some of the states to the east—are damned near ruined now. It's happened before, sure, but this time it's a controlled deal. I've got ten days left, Vencel, to get that machine."

Vencel stared at Blue Peak. "Ten days to find the hole it's in and blow it up?"

"To get it, I said. Intact."

"My God!"

"It's an arbitrary limit, of course. It's based partly on the fact that some of the crops can be saved within that limit, and partly on orders. Orders from fear, Vencel."

Raven and Sillcott were coming in now.

"It's got something to do with cosmic rays," Catron said doggedly. "It's nothing atomic. Instruments a hundred times more sensitive than Geiger counters show only normal activity anywhere on Blue Peak." He lit a cigarette. His hands were trembling.

"We're afraid that this one is only small potatoes, Vencel, just a test. Look what a full-scale use of it could do to us in war. Things don't even have to go that far! Suppose we have droughts that ruin our food supplies. Hungry people are unhappy people, Vencel. No surer way exists to cause discontent than shutting off a man's food, which is precisely what the equipment in Blue Peak can do for millions of Americans."

The whole thing was incredible, but a fear squirmed in Vencel and told him everything was so. He sat where grass was dying, where the needles of fir trees showed the dark of winter. He was at Grizzly Lake. On any afternoon like this years ago there would have been thunder on the mountains and rains sweeping across the water.

Raven came up the hill briskly. He looked at the faces of the two men on the log and said, "How much have you said, Catron?"

"Quite a bit."

"I disapprove."

Without heat Catron said, "That's too bad. It's my responsibility, Raven. I'll tell anybody anything if I think it will help get the job done."

"In this case, will it help?"

"Yes," Catron said. "Vencel probably knows this region better than any man we could have found."

"I hope so." Raven looked at Vencel. "Who was the skeleton?"

"Gust Olson. He had two gold front teeth. They were knocked out to make identification hard. The silver plate in your pocket covered cranial surgery that was done on him long ago."

"You seem quite positive," Raven said. It was evident that he was considering Vencel's statement and that was all.

"Hell!" Catron said. "Olson was the man who owned those claims that are under water now. Uh-huh!"

"He disappeared in 1944. He wouldn't have anything to do with your problem," Vencel said.

"The hole was probably being readied before that," Catron said. "This Olson undoubtedly stumbled on to the operation and was killed."

None of Olson's tunnels had been deep. Vencel considered the idea that one of them could have been driven much deeper, on a rising grade to get above the lake level. But there were several facts that stood against that possibility. "Does this machine or equipment—this weather-wrecker"—the vagueness of his own terms troubled him—"does it require operators, or is it an automatic affair?"

Catron and Raven looked at each other. "It requires operators, several of them," Catron said.

"You mean they've gone into a hole and pulled it in after them?"

"They do just that," Catron said.

There had been other cases then. The men would have to have good air. Catron's wild guess about Olson's tunnels was impaired none by that fact, Vencel knew, for huge sections of the limestone of Blue Peak were almost porous. He remembered miners saying that smoke from rounds shot in the mines of the mountain cleared quickly, drifting up through the fractured formations.

Catron glanced at the sky above Blue Peak. "The machine has been going day and night since early spring."

Vencel recalled that the valley around Midway had suffered the worst floods in history from the melting snow.

"One of Olson's tunnels," Catron murmured.

Vencel asked, "Big installation?"

"Tons of it, as far as we know," the colonel said.

"Maybe it's on the surface."

"No! Planes have mapped the whole area. We've scratched everywhere. It's in the mountain, Vencel."

"What happens when you unplug the hole?"

"They blow it up. Everything goes to hell," Catron said.

"It's happened?"

Once more Raven and the colonel looked at each other. "It's happened," Catron said. "The biggest piece of gear we recovered was a small condenser. The largest piece of the operators was a hand. The fingerprints were those of a man with a subversive record as long as a well rope." He stared at the peak. "This time I'm going to get everything intact."

The boat was in once more. White was walking up the hill behind two men carrying a tarpaulin between them. Raven went over to meet the group.

"It hinges on Olson's tunnels," Catron said. "I've looked everywhere else. Finding Olson just about convinces me. Raven is F.B.I., Vencel. He checked everything there was about Gust Olson because the old man had lived here at the lake. The old fellow was unhappy at the home. He ran away one night. Your local authorities never found out any more than that. Raven found out that he got a ride from a truck driver who let him out on the highway where the lake road starts. Olson said his son ran a sawmill close by." Catron paused. "I wish we knew what Olson ran into up here."

Old Gust . . . losing the last of his marbles in the county home, obsessed with a desire to return to the lake. Vencel cursed the men who had killed him.

"Will you stay and help me?" Catron asked.

Vencel nodded.

"I would have held you here anyway, if I could have got past Raven. When you're in this business, Vencel, you're in to the finish, just like the men in the peak. They tried to get you with a jawlifter. You were in the wrong place, with too much knowledge of the country. They were afraid of you; therefore, you're valuable to me. All I have to do is find out what you know that made them afraid of you."

"I don't know myself."

"They don't kill indiscriminately. You know things about this lake that make you dangerous. Before we're through you'll remember them."

"I hope so." Vencel was doubtful.

White came over to them. His hair was a pale wet plaster. Even his scalp appeared burned. "Raven took charge of the skeleton, sir."

"That's all right," Catron said. "He can effect positive identification quicker than anyone I know." He rose. "I'm going to Midway, Lieutenant. Vencel knows what we're doing here. Fill him in if he needs more briefing."

The colonel went toward his tent in a hurry.

For the first time in months Vencel's hip began to hurt badly as he went up the hill with White. The lieutenant glanced curiously at Vencel, who walked now with a pronounced limping motion.

A sentry stood in front of the headquarters tent now. Catron was reading a message just handed him by a radioman. The colonel did not like the contents. He cursed savagely without saying a word, and then he gave the message to White, who read it and took it inside the tent.

A jeep came down from the motor pool. Catron motioned the driver to get out. A moment later the colonel was headed for the front ridge with the engine bellowing.

Raven drove away a few minutes later, with another civilian in the front seat, with the canvas that held Olson's skeleton in the back seat. Vencel saw Sillcott talking to the meteorologists. There was, as usual, a dissatisfied expression on Sillcott's face, as if this whole affair had violated all known principles of science.

The electronics hot shot gave Vencel a brief, sour look when White and Vencel walked past the weather stands a few moments later.

"The colonel doesn't like Sillcott, I gather," Vencel said.

"No," White answered. "When *did* the army ever get along with those characters, or vice versa? They do things one way and we do them another way, and right now authority on this operation is a mixed-up affair."

"How do you mean?"

"Theoretically, the colonel is in charge, but all the branches of civil government involved in the job retain their own authority as far as they can. A minute ago Catron got a message refusing him absolute control of every phase of the operation.

"Yet they give him a time limit to get the thing done. If he fails, he gets relieved. It isn't fair. How are you going to root those bastards out of the mountain and get their gear in any given length of time? Just finding where they went in is tough enough."

It was indeed, Vencel thought.

"There's a hundred and six men working details all over Blue Peak," White said. "There's a big detail cleaning out the old Kingsley tunnel on the other side on a forlorn chance that it's the place." He shook his head. "Time limit. Hell's fire!"

They went into a tent with four cots ranged along the sidewalls. Lieutenant Speer was sitting on one. He had shaved. He looked trim and fresh and tough.

"Vencel is one of the boys now," White said. "We found a skeleton in the lake. Sillcott threw a fit when he saw a mining car come up, instead of a nice big box all rigged up with some kind of an automatic machine. What kind of news have you got?"

"I checked most of the details by radio," Speer said. "Nothing. Two of Campton's men saw a mountain sheep. What about the skeleton?"

White sat down on a cot and dabbed at his blistered face with his fingers. "What about it, Vencel? You seemed to know who it was."

Vencel told them about Gust Olson.

Speer was absorbed in thought for several minutes. "About all I can see in that is that he wandered in here at the wrong time. That makes two guys knocked off already."

"Two?" Vencel said.

"Yeah." Speer nodded. "With you lined out for the third. You remember about two weeks ago a salesman named Silvers went to sleep on Columbus Pass and let his car go off a seven-hundred-foot drop?"

"I read about it," Vencel said.

"Silvers was a Federal Communications agent. He was the one who first pin-pointed Blue Peak as the source of the humming sounds we've been looking for. He and his men were trying to get cross-fixes on the radio that keeps in contact with the men inside the mountain. They generally work in pairs, but one night Silvers went up Columbus Pass alone.

"He must have got right on top of the radio. The next morning a highway patrolman saw tracks leading off the road. Silvers was down there. You read about an accident in the papers. Raven says Silvers was dead when his car went off the highway. He rolled and dropped seven hundred feet." Speer shrugged. "Can you blame the county coroner for his report?"

"How would the F.B.I. know different?" Vencel asked. "A body all smashed up like that——"

"They know," Speer said. "They went over the car and everything else by fractions." Apparently he had a great deal of respect for the F.B.I. "Raven says Silvers was killed by an up-swinging weapon, very sharp and heavy, something that chopped clear from his chin to his brain."

The tent was hot and oppressive. The three men looked quietly at each other. Someone at the motor pool was singing "High Noon" in a doleful voice.

"I still can't see why those fellows would want to kill me just because they thought I knew the country too well," Vencel said stubbornly. "They know that their hole is going to be found sooner or later anyway."

"You went into Lime Creek Canyon too often," White said. "Twice there have been fixes on the radio from somewhere in that canyon. It moves all the time, of course, but twice at least it's been there. Every day you were in the canyon."

"Fishing," Vencel said.

"Sure, we know that," Speer said. "But the rats that are running loose around the edges of this thing didn't buy the idea."

Another heavy plane roared over the mountains, this time coming from the west. After the sound was gone Vencel said, "With all the men and equipment you've got here, with all the agencies that are working on this——"

"Yes," White said. "We should have everything settled. That's what the high brass has been saying, too.

The weather-wrecker is right here under our feet. It's a big layout. It takes men to run it, and they have to have food and supplies. More tonnage. Someone outside keeps in contact with them." White was half angry. "Where would you put the tons of equipment, Vencel?"

"I don't know."

"Our patrols are scrambling around like goats," Speer said. "There's guys running in circles looking for that radio transmitter. We're going against something that was doped out long in advance, but the brass says get 'em in two weeks. About half the time is gone now."

"They couldn't have done much work here without being seen or heard," Vencel said. "The water commissioner sends men up here now and then. Forest rangers and soil-conservation men drop by occasionally. Then there are hikers and even a few idiots who think there are still fish here."

"How about the winter?" Speer asked.

"The lake rises slowly. Say they started from one of Olson's tunnels, which I don't believe. They could have got by working there during the early part of winter." Vencel shook his head. "But any regular blasting would have been heard by the highway maintenance crews on top of Columbus Pass. That's just a few miles south along the range." He looked at Lieutenant White. "Did Catron head for Midway to see about getting the lake drained?"

"That's my guess," White said. "How long will it take to drop the water to the level of the natural lake?"

"At least three days, with all valves wide open."

"Oh, hell!" White got up and began to pace the tent.

"He takes it hard," Speer said. "The colonel is his uncle."

"What's wrong with that?" White demanded.

"Nothing, except that it makes you overstrain."

Vencel eyed the two lieutenants keenly. He had guessed rightly that Speer was a mustang up from the ranks and that White was probably West Point. The natural friction was none of Vencel's business. He said, "Who do you think searched my cabin at Okie's?"

"We did," Speer said. "Once. Harper did it twice that we know of."

"Harper! That stupid-looking waiter?"

"Him," Speer said. "For Pete's sake, man, everybody that stops on Columbus Pass to take a picture or pick a flower gets a checking back to his grandfather these days. You weren't overlooked."

"Who's Harper? I mean which side——"

"We don't know," Speer said. "Not everybody tells everybody else what's going on. That's what makes this Chinese fire drill so interesting."

White stopped pacing. "Interesting? Is that what you call it?"

"Murderous then. Anything you want to call it." Speer shrugged, looking at Vencel.

To ease the tension Vencel asked, "How long were you in the ring, Speer?"

"Just in the army, up until I got a commission. I never was a pro. I found the boys in the service tough enough to suit me."

Lieutenant Speer did not look as if he had ever found anything tough enough to suit him, Vencel thought.

It seemed to him that the sunset that evening on Blue Peak carried a deadness in the colors. All the personnel of the camp, including officers, ate in a common mess tent that was steaming hot. The civilians sat apart, one group centering around Sillcott. With the exception of two or three older men who clearly showed the remote containment that comes from long years of doing research, the scientists—the only term that Vencel could apply to the group—were young men with nothing to distinguish them from other young men who might be found on any street in America.

Sillcott was aloof. He spoke only to the older members of his group.

Vencel spent a restless night. It was too warm, and he had too much to think about. He heard every change of sentries. There must be guards along the frontal ridge, he thought, because jeeps came and went all night long, and a corporal of the guard toured the camp in another jeep. Several times the sound of outboards came from the lake.

Sometime during the night he heard a new sound and finally recognized it. It was the steady pounding of water at the dam: the valves had been opened wide.

Gust Olson always used to be there when that took place, and then he would tour the edges of the lake, waiting for the water to recede, waiting to see the portals of tunnels he never entered. A harmless old man. The bottom of the lake was dark and cold. Vencel was glad that Gust was down there no longer.

Speer and White were up and gone before Vencel went to breakfast. Sillcott sat like a bored giant in the middle of the same group of scientists. Raven was with four other civilians, and now, knowing who Raven was, Vencel could recognize the calling of the other four. Several times they glanced casually at Vencel.

Greatly dissimilar in appearance, Sillcott and Raven were nevertheless touched with a sameness: a dedication to purpose that allowed no other interests. It was clear to Vencel as he studied them. He hoped that he would never have Raven on his trail.

Catron sent for Vencel before he finished breakfast. The colonel looked as if he had had a few hours of sleep and was now ready to go forty-eight hours with none.

"We're draining the lake," he said. "Here's the tracing of the plats of Olson's claims. By the way, that was Olson all right. The county physician made identification through dental X rays in the files at the home where Olson lived. Raven is still checking into it, however."

"For the cause of death?"

"No hope for that," Catron said. "Raven is still making identification. He never accepts the first statement of anyone about anything." Catron tapped his desk.

"Look at this plat. It shows seven claims, with a short tunnel on each. Now is that right?"

Vencel leaned on the field desk, studying the map. "As I remember, yes. I'd have to walk along the shore line to be sure."

"You said seven or eight tunnels. Which was it?"

"Seven must be right. They were all driven into little stringers off the iron dike in Blue Peak by someone long before Olson."

"We'll have a look at them in a few days." Catron chewed his lip. "I'd like to dynamite that dam, but I can't get authority for it. The water would knock out two highway bridges, ruin a few farms—what does that amount to, compared with what we're facing otherwise? But I can't get the authority, and I'm not quite at the point of acting without it."

The colonel might be closer than he thought to the point of acting on his own, Vencel reflected. There was hot stirring of impatience in Catron now.

"I understand you made arrangements to be back at the tourist camp within two days," Catron said. "We'd better clear that up at once. You can make an appearance there this morning and check out. Don't overexplain anything, and don't try to be mysterious. Get your car and leave it at the three-gear pool at the foot of our road."

"If I show up at Okie's in an army jeep——"

"You'll be in an unmarked sedan, with Speer. I can take no chances with you, Vencel—not after what I've told you. If you should disappear Raven's boys would be unhappy—and I would be looking a court-martial right in the eye."

Raven was in front of the mess tent when Vencel passed on his way to the motor pool. Lieutenant Speer was already waiting in a jeep. When they were going toward the front ridge Vencel glanced back and saw Raven trotting toward the headquarters tent.

Speer stopped where a sentry stood in the road at the break-over. "She clear, Martin?"

The sentry walked to a field phone on a hooded shelf nailed to a tree. After the call he came back and said, "You can make it to the wide place at the old cabin. You'll have to wait there for a dozer and a pull blade that are knocking points off some of the curves."

"A hell of a time to be fixing the road." Speer dropped into the first steep pitch.

Built some seventy years before, the road followed the principle that the shortest distance between two points was up or down the toughest hill in sight. The army had not changed the location of the road, but merely pulled dirt from the banks where dirt was available, dozed away the worst of the high rocks, and filled a few stretches where the granite was exposed. It was still not a route for tourists.

Much of the road ran through black timber where a deep silence lay. On the rocky points, some of them five hundred feet or more above great ravines, the whining of cars and the rumbling of trucks on the highway came up to the two men in the jeep.

From a few of the points they could see the shine of Okie's aluminum roof on the café and the lesser spots of color made by gasoline signs that leaned against his garage.

"This radio," Vencel said, "how come they can't get a fix on it and pin it down?"

"Its signals are short and sweet—and it moves."

"Have you cracked the code?"

"No. Apparently it's too simple. They send only numbers. The radio boys figure the numbers fit a chart of prearranged messages, like the numbers on a breakfast menu. There's never any reply, of course. How you going to bust a code like that?"

The plan was most effective, Vencel thought. *Number One: Everything is working fine. Keep it up. Number Ten: It's getting hot, but not too hot.*

At a wide spot in the dark timber they came abreast of a jeep parked near a spring where trees were growing from the ruins of a cabin. The bellow of a dozer came from not far ahead. Speer pulled off the road and waited.

"Whose jeep?" Vencel asked.

"Some of Sillcott's boys. Something on the power line that goes over the mountain louses up their instruments now and then. They've been trying to find it."

The dozer came by towing the pull blade. Both operators were dusty and sweating. Unless the army had made other turnouts farther down the hill, there was only one more, Vencel knew. He shifted weight in the seat, dreading the rest of the ride.

"You got a bad leg?" Speer asked.

"Hip," Vencel said. There was more plastic in the rebuilt joint than bone. He wondered sometimes if it needed oiling.

The dozer went to the upper end of the wide place and came around. The operator cut his engine to idling speed. He drank at the spring, coming up from his hands and knees with water dripping from his chin. "I'm making another pass at the road going back. If you're in a hurry, Lieutenant——"

"Yeah," Speer said. "I don't plan to get caught behind you." He pulled away.

They reached the place where Speer had driven the jeep up from the logging road the day before. "Do you want out here?" Speer asked. "You can walk down and drive your car around to the pool and meet me there. Then both of us can go back to Okie's to check you out." He stopped the jeep.

"A darned good idea." Vencel started to get out.

"Maybe not so good. If the colonel found out I let you get ten feet away from me——"

"The colonel is better upholstered for riding in a jeep than I am," Vencel said. He stretched his legs and rubbed his hip. "Your three-gear pool is right at the foot of this road, huh?"

"Yeah. But maybe we'd better not do it this way."

"It's no more than a quarter down to my car. I'll have it and be around at the pool in fifteen minutes. That way there won't be two cars buzzing around the entrance to that old road."

From here they could see part of the high bridge at the head of the canyon and Okie's place. Speer scowled. "Better get back in the jeep, Vencel."

"To hell with your jeep." Vencel grinned. He started down the hill. A few moments later he heard the jeep pull away, going fast toward the three-gear pool. Speer probably would not take any chances. He would swing around on the highway and block the entrance to the road where Vencel's car was parked.

From far up the mountain came the growling of the bulldozer on its way down.

Vencel was on a mat of grass a hundred feet from his car when he heard the sound of metal on metal. The road was a leafy tunnel here. He went around a turn and saw his car. A man was doing something under the open hood. It was Harper, the waiter at Okie's place.

Vencel's first thought was anger at the idea of one of his windows being smashed or a door lock jimmied to allow Harper to get inside to release the hood catch. He swung to the side and kept the car between him and Harper as he went forward.

He was not conscious of making any noise when he came around the back of the sedan, but Harper jerked away from his work. One hand held a pair of pliers. There was no stupidity on the waiter's face now. He dropped the pliers and started to reach inside his jacket as Vencel rushed him. Lacking time to draw his gun, Harper straight-armed with the heel of his left hand.

The blow smacked hard against Vencel's cheekbone. His head snapped back and the sharp point of his surge was blunted.

Calmly then Harper smashed him in the stomach with his other hand. Hurt badly, Vencel stumbled on into the man, grasping at him. He tried to pin Harper against the fender, to hold him there until he could recover enough to beat him down at close range.

Harper was like a great cat, all rippling power and smoothness. His shoulder smashed into Vencel's chest. His right hand drove up and cracked into Vencel's jaw. Vencel twisted away. He tried to hammer one straight blow into Harper's throat. It was low, landing just at the open V of Harper's shirt, but it drove the man back into the fender.

For an instant he was off balance and helpless. Vencel tried to measure him and strike in the same moment. He was too slow. Harper slid along the fender. He would have got clear, but one leg caught against the hook of the front bumper. Vencel tried to jam him further into trouble.

Something happened to Vencel's arm. The blow went out but it did not land. Harper caught his wrist and twisted. The shoulder went numb. Vencel knew he would have been flung over his back with a dislocated shoulder if the other man had been given room to bend and make a half turn with his body.

As it was, Vencel was twisted off balance and sent reeling sidewise. Harper leaped away from the bumper and drew a short-barreled revolver.

"Stand still!" he said. His chest was barely moving from his exertion. He held the stubby revolver like one who knew how to use it. "Back up three slow steps." He counted the steps as Vencel obeyed. "If you have a gun —forget it."

I should have known, Vencel thought. He overdid that stupidity act all the time he was at Okie's. An instant later he changed his mind. Why should I have known? I just got cut into the deal yesterday.

Harper circled away from Vencel. "Step over to the car and look at the engine."

While Vencel moved forward, he watched Harper from the corner of his eye.

Lying on the engine head was a black box about five inches square and two inches deep. It was insulated with plastic wrapping. Two wires led from it. One went toward a spark plug. The other was still grounded on a bolt of the heater frame. The nut on the bolt was backed part way off and showed the bright marks of plier jaws.

"Pick up the pliers," Harper said. "Run the nut on out and give me the bomb. Handle it only by the wires." He spoke as one instructing a child.

Vencel did as he was told. Bomb! They weren't satisfied with one try with the jawlifter. A touch on the starter button and the front end of the car would have been ripped into strips of smoking metal.

"Handle it only by the wires," Harper said.

Holding the bomb gingerly, Vencel observed that the tightness of the plastic tape was underlaid with round indentations on the sides of the object. Like knockouts in an electrical junction box, he thought. "Tetryl again?"

"Lay it on the ground, then move away from it."

When Harper held the bomb by one of the wires he backed off, putting his gun away. "Your spare keys are in the glove compartment. I took them three nights ago. One other thing, I was *removing* the bomb."

"How'd you know it was there?"

"I thought it might be."

"Who are you, Harper?"

Harper continued to back away, and then he turned and went up the logging road, looking back over his shoulder until he was out of sight.

"Well, hell," Vencel said.

The fact that Harper had not bothered to search him for a gun was a tribute both to Harper's opinion of Vencel's judgment and to the man's confidence in himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR A FEW MOMENTS VENCEL LISTENED to the silence, looking in the direction Harper had gone. He rubbed his sore shoulder. He put the loom wire back on the spark plug and tightened the bolt on the heater frame, and it was then he recognized the pliers as his own. When he returned them to the glove compartment, he saw his spare keys.

After this he would lock his car up every night, at least until he grew careless again.

He scouted down the road for a place to turn the car. The edges of the road were fouled with dead timber, and rocks were hiding in the underbrush. After a time he began moving the worst obstacles out of one spot to gain backing clearance.

He returned to the car. When he reached toward the starter, he hesitated. I'm spooky, he thought. Or maybe I'm getting smart. He jerked the hood catch, got out and looked at the engine. He had just got back in the car when he heard the shot from the direction in which Harper had gone.

The dozer was making racket up that way, but still there was no doubt that he had heard a shot. Just the distant growling of the dozer was all he heard after that.

He went back up the logging road. Where the jeep had started angling up the hill he found his own tracks and Harper's. He hesitated, staring into the scattered trees. Somewhere high on the lake road he heard a second engine. There must be a jeep behind the dozer now. He went up the hill.

Harper was lying face down where raspberries grew among gray rocks. The back of his head was a mess of brain tissue and shattered bone where a bullet had emerged. One arm was stretched in front of him, with the fingers a few inches from the bomb. The other arm was doubled under him, as if he had reached for his gun an instant before he died.

The dozer already had passed this point. Vencel heard it cut to idling speed down the road. There came the higher engine sound of a jeep close to it, and at the same time the noise of a second jeep coming down the road.

Vencel yelled and waved his arms when the downcoming vehicle was close. Raven was driving it. Beside him sat a blocky-faced man with sandy hair. He was smoking a thin-stemmed pipe that left a puff of smoke hanging in the air when the man unloaded in a leap.

They came down the hill. The quick glance they exchanged carried some significance that must have been based on long experience together. All at once the pipe in the mouth of the sandy-haired man became most fragile in contrast with the heavy bones of his face. He looked at Vencel coldly.

Raven spoke quietly, carefully, "How did you get separated from Lieutenant Speer, Vencel?"

Vencel explained. He told about the incident at the car. He pointed at the bomb. He was not sure that Raven or the other man believed a word he said.

"Did you have a gun?" Raven asked.

"No."

"You don't object to my searching you?"

"No."

Raven's hands were brisk and firm. He said then to his companion, "Search the hillside, Trichak."

Lieutenant Speer stopped bumper to bumper with Raven's jeep. He came down the hill in leaps. When he saw the dead man, the scar tissue in his eyebrows pinched into white lumps. His eyes moved in quick jerks from Raven to Vencel.

"Why did you and Vencel separate?" Raven asked.

Speer told the truth.

"What brought you back here?"

"I heard a shot. I was afraid Vencel had got it."

"Where were you when you heard the shot?" Raven asked.

"At the three-gear pool."

"How did you get past the dozer?"

"At the turnout down the road."

"Do you object to my searching you?"

"Hell, yes," Speer said. "I'm not a civilian." He and Raven looked at each other steadily.

"Do you object to my searching you?" There was no change in the tone of Raven's voice.

"Go ahead."

Once more Raven was quick and efficient, and then he said, "Will you go to the lower pool, please, Lieutenant, and call the colonel and ask him to come down here at once?"

For an instant Vencel thought Speer was going to say he was not taking orders from Raven. Then Speer nodded and went back to the road and began to seesaw his jeep around.

Raven turned Harper over. The bullet had caught him at the bridge of his nose. Raven looked at him without change of expression. He picked up the bomb by a wire. "This was on your car, Vencel?"

"Yes."

"How long ago was the shot?"

"Ten minutes, I suppose."

"You're sure?"

"It must have been about that long ago."

"No sooner, no later?"

"That's it."

"Why are you favoring one leg, Vencel?"

"I have a bad hip."

"Sit down and wait, Vencel." Raven studied the body. He looked all around at the hill, and then he went up on the road and stood there. Presently he called to someone higher up the hill. Two men with portable equipment that looked like small radios joined him on the road.

They were two of the group Vencel had seen in the mess hall with Sillcott. Raven said, "Glassner, did you or Cartwright hear a shot?"

Glassner shook his head. He was a thin man with a dark face and small white teeth. "I did not. Did you, Cartwright?"

"No."

"How far up the power line were you?" Raven asked.

"We started just south of where we left our jeep at the spring where the old cabin is. We've been working down."

"You should have heard a shot," Raven said flatly.

"We had our headphones on most of the time. We're getting power interference off this line, Raven," Glassner said. "There's a humming sound, a scratching noise—you can't hear anything else when you're using this testing equipment."

"I see." If Raven was disappointed, it did not color his voice. "Do you mind not going any farther down the hill for a while?"

"Sillcott certainly will mind," Cartwright said.

"I'll take that up with him later. Stay here, if you please."

Sillcott's men kept glancing down the hill at Harper. "I guess we'd better wait," Glassner said.

Speer came jouncing up the road a few minutes later. "The colonel is on his way."

Trichak was walking slowly among the scattered trees fifty feet down the hill. Standing on the road, Raven was a short, muscular figure, scrutinizing the scene below him like a quarterback considering his next play. When

Catron arrived Raven said, "Come up, please, Vencel."

There was quick talk between the colonel and Raven that Vencel did not hear. Then Catron said, "That's it, Raven! We don't know whose men are who. I'll admit that I've had Speer and White watching Harper a few times. How could we know he was your man?"

Raven said, "I hope you didn't know. I'm following my orders and my methods of carrying them out."

"So am I! So is Sillcott, and so are others. The result is we don't have five cents' worth of unity."

Raven's face was remarkably inexpressive. "That the authority is not in one basket is the fault of none of us." He lit a cigarette. "I would like to take Vencel and Lieutenant Speer back to the lake now so that they can give me complete statements about this."

"They had nothing to do with it," Catron said.

"I didn't say they did."

"They have something to do this morning, Raven. You can talk to them this afternoon, when there's time. I have my methods of carrying out my orders also."

Catron's bold stare was challenging. Raven was calm and reflective. When he said, "All right, Colonel, this afternoon then," Vencel knew it was no retreat. The impression lingered that in any contest of pure intelligence Raven would be the winner.

The colonel looked sharply at Speer. "Carry out your assignment, Lieutenant. Report to me as soon as you return. Clear this road at once."

"Yes, sir." Speer leaped into his jeep and began to jockey it around. He had not completed the turn when Sillcott stopped behind the colonel's jeep. Glassner and Cartwright went to him quickly, gesturing, pointing, talking.

Sillcott swung out. He slapped his hand at dust on his knees. He was scowling when he walked up to Raven. "I resent your holding my men from their work."

Raven glanced down the hill. "I resent *that,* Sillcott.

Your men will be free to resume their work after I talk to them a few minutes longer."

"I consider them free now." Sillcott looked down at Harper. For a man of science he showed remarkably little reaction to violence. "Of all the bungled attempts to conduct a simple operation. . . ." Sillcott's scorn included both Raven and the colonel.

Raven merely looked at Sillcott, judging the man, weighing some thought. He would never block the free flow of his intelligence with useless anger, Vencel thought. Catron, however, was cold with anger. He said softly, "What has been your contribution to date, Sillcott?"

When Vencel left with Speer, Raven was talking to Glassner and Cartwright and making notes in a small book.

Speer sent the jeep bouncing down the road. Vencel said, "That Raven is dangerous."

"He chills me, too," Speer said. "Cold-blooded."

It was not that about Raven, Vencel decided, but rather, deliberateness, intelligence and a driving force that only death would check.

"Did it sound like a pistol?" Speer asked.

"I thought so, a heavy one. The man must have stood on the road." Then the pull blade had scraped away his marks. The two men on the road equipment probably had not heard the shot, and they must have been too intent on their work to have seen Harper lying in the rocks.

Speer jerked the front wheels away from an uprooted boulder. "Radetsky and I at the three-gear weren't even sure for a minute that we'd heard a shot. It scared hell out of me when I got to thinking about you. I could see myself salted down in Leavenworth for life."

The savage face of violence was strong in Vencel's mind. His stomach was tight and his hip was hurting badly. Silvers, the F.C.C. man, Olson, and now an F.B.I. agent. This was a hell of a rough deal.

The three-gear pool was out of sight of the highway but within a hundred yards of it, about two miles from Okie's place and about six miles from the top of the pass. Dozers had smashed the aspens back to make room for army-drab sedans, jeeps, six unmarked sedans with license plates from Western states, a portable machine shop, light trucks and a radio trailer.

Farther back in the trees Vencel saw two tents. On the road between the pool and the highway a sentry was standing duty with a .30 carbine. A stocky, gray-haired sergeant came from the trees and tramped across the parking area when Speer drove in. He walked heavily, with his feet pointing outward, and his shoes made plops in the dust.

There had been dust on Harper's face when Raven turned him over, Vencel remembered. Dust . . . here in the high country where the leaf mat should have been damp and the trees fresh summer-green.

Speer said, "Give us that baby with the Colorado license, Radetsky."

"Okay, Lieutenant." The sergeant backed a green sedan from the row. When Speer and Vencel were in it he asked, "What was it up there, Lieutenant?"

"What was what?"

"The shot."

"A guy got it."

"One of our outfit?"

"Civilian."

"Geez!" Radetsky said. "What's going on around here?"

"Maneuvers," Speer said. He drove away. Just short of the highway he braked suddenly. Okie's weapons carrier was going downhill with a black coupé in tow, the front end of the coupé hoisted by the winch in the back of the tow car.

"You know something," Speer said. "I'm wondering about that Okie character. He's in a good spot to be using the radio we're after. When I first came down to the pool a while ago Radetsky was telling me the radio boys started hopping like fleas last night. I'll bet there's been another message sent, and I can guess what it was."

"That the lake was being drained?"

"Sure."

"The water makes plenty of noise in the canyon as soon as the gates are lifted," Vencel said. "Okie would hear it soon enough." He shook his head. "But I can't see him in on this deal."

"He seems legit, all right, but he's in a good spot, and he's always flitting around, towing a car—or saying he fixed a fuel pump or something."

"This time he *is* towing a car, Speer."

"There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it that I could see. Why couldn't it have coasted down?"

"Because a tow between Okie's place and the top of the pass costs fifteen bucks." Vencel laughed.

Speer grinned. "That makes sense from what I've seen of Okie, but we can take a look at that car just the same."

They drifted down the highway, giving Okie plenty of time to reach his place ahead of them.

Vencel said, "You could narrow the radio part down by closing this highway and patrolling it. Then if the radio blipped a number, you'd know for sure it wasn't coming from a refrigerator truck or a big freight job or anything moving."

"Very good," Speer said. "That's just what Catron tried to get done. He couldn't swing it. His answer was that closing the pass would throw too much attention on the area. The brass want us to get that weather-wrecker, sure, but they're deathly afraid the general public might get wise to the fact that such a thing exists. You keep hearing warnings that we haven't got all the brains in the world, but no one really believes that.

"We got the hydrogen bomb. We got a lot of things. We're way ahead, we tell ourselves. Think of the panic there'd be if the people found out suddenly just how far behind we are."

Speer parked near the cabins. Okie and a well-dressed fat man were arguing near the front of a Utah coupé still fast to the weapons carrier. "Why, hell!" the fat man said. "I could have got a tow clear back to Midway for less——"

"For twenty-five bucks," Okie said. "Down there they'd stick you fifty for the fender job. I'll tell you what I'll do. . . ."

In the trees near the trailer where Harper had lived Vencel saw the coupé that had hobbled into Okie's just before he left with Speer and White the day before. Speer was looking at it too. "Let's snoop a little before you tell Okie you're checking out."

They walked over to the Utah car. The fat man was saying, "Just jack the fender out so I can drive, mister. I'll have the insurance company take care of everything when I get home."

"Utah is a long haul." Okie shook his head. "Your steering most likely is all messed up. You'd better have me make a good check——"

"Never mind that. I don't drive fast anyway." The fat man laughed. He looked at Speer and Vencel and his humor included them.

The right fender of the coupé, Vencel observed, had been bent into the wheel so that it would have been impossible to steer the car. He and Speer exchanged casual glances.

"Sideswiped?" Vencel asked.

"An idiot ran me off the road into the bank," the fat man said.

Okie scratched his cheek. "How was the fishing on the other side of the hill?"

"Fair." Vencel nodded toward the light coupé in the trees. "How much did you give for that, Okie?"

"I didn't. The owner's working here until he makes enough to get it fixed."

The fat man said, "I'll bet he'll have a long stay!" He laughed uproariously and whacked Vencel on the back.

Okie said, "About that steering—"

"Never you mind. You jack the fender away from the tire and if the thing steers at all, I'll be all right." The fat man winked at Vencel and Speer. "He thinks I'm a tourist."

"What did you do, can Harper?" Vencel asked.

"You take faulty steering. . . . Harper?" Okie cursed. "He quit this morning. Well, yeah, you might say I fired him. I was going to as soon as I got around to it. He was no good."

"He wasn't much of a waiter," Vencel said.

"No good at all," Okie said absently. He stared at the fender of the coupé. "I'll bet you busted the cords in that tire when you hit the bank. I just happen to have a tire that size—"

"I got some Indian jewelry," the fat man said. "The real stuff, not junk. Generally I don't put it out in small places like this, but I'll tell you what I'll do——"

"Ain't interested," Okie said quickly.

"I thought so," the fat man said. "Just get that fender away from my wheel, and we'll get along fine." His laugh and the humor trapped in the puckers of his eyes were infectious. Before he got to the café with Speer and Vencel he had introduced himself, J. B. Collins, novelty salesman with no company affiliation, home Salt Lake City.

In a way, Vencel thought, Collins was just too damned typically well-met, good-humored and fast with his tongue. So much so that he probably really was what he said he was. Two days before Vencel would not have doubted him for an instant.

Speer's side glance showed that he had his doubts; but Speer was a professional who probably would not trust his own son.

There were six or seven customers in the café. The new waiter stood behind the counter, trying, it seemed, not to look as surly as his natural instincts made him. He said, "Hey!" when Vencel started around the counter to go into the kitchen.

"It's all right," Vencel said. Mrs. Saunders was patting hamburgers with a spatula. Her heavy face beamed when she saw Vencel.

She said, "You didn't stay long."

"I got hungry. When it comes to eating there's no place like your kitchen."

Mrs. Saunders was pleased.

Vencel helped himself to sliced chicken on a platter. He spoke with his mouth full. "Where'd the new man come from?"

"His car broke down here. Johnny Harper walked out on me, so Okie hired this fellow. His name is Sam Bader." Mrs. Saunders wiped perspiration from her face with a towel. "I think I liked Harper better," she said in a low voice. "Even if he was all thumbs."

"He *was* sort of clumsy. Where'd he come from anyway?"

"From the state employment office in Midway. They sent him up when the girl quit last month. She was a good one, that Edith, but you know how girls are in a place like this where there's nothing to do in the evenings."

"Nobody ever told me." Vencel grinned. "How are they?"

Mrs. Saunders took a swipe at him with a dish towel. "What are you going to eat?"

"Just coffee."

"You! You came back here complaining about being hungry."

"I'll make up for it later. I'm going back over the hill today, so I guess I'll check out until I see what my friends have got in mind."

When Vencel sat down in the café, Bader put a cup of coffee before him without speaking. The man had good ears, Vencel thought. His interest in roadside café waiters had increased considerably in the last two days, so now he studied Bader carefully.

The man's hands were big and calloused. There were broken nails that had been trimmed recently. The back of his neck had seen much weather. Bader made no effort to be pleasant; and, unlike Harper, he made no pretense of being dull-witted. Mrs. Saunders called for him to come in and wash dishes. He walked lightly, with his feet straight, Vencel observed.

The salesman Collins had just finished telling Speer a story. The lieutenant smiled politely. He too had been watching Bader. Collins stretched down the counter and dragged a Midway newspaper to him. He put on a pair of rimless glasses. The lead story was about explosion tests at Grizzly Lake.

After a while Collins said, "Hey, this Julius C. Catron —wasn't he the general that got mixed up in a crooked war plant deal during the war?"

Speer shrugged.

"No." Collins put a stubby finger on a line in the story. "No. I remember now! He was mixed up in one of those un-American investigations. He was a major general, and he was selling information to the enemy."

"Does it say so there?" Speer asked.

"No, no! It says he's in charge of explosion tests twenty-four miles west of Midway. That's right close to here. How do you like that! One minute he's dealing with the enemy, and the next minute he's doing secret work."

"There's nothing secret about explosion tests," Speer said. "Except the results. He must have been cleared."

"How do you clear a general that sells the country out?" Collins asked indignantly. "They whitewashed him, you mean. The army's great at that sort of thing." Collins shoved the newspaper away, and Speer picked it up.

"He's just a colonel now, if it's the same guy you're thinking of," Speer said. "They didn't whitewash too much if he got busted from major general." He passed the paper on to Vencel.

There was remarkably little information in the story of the explosion tests. Vencel read with keen interest a story he would ordinarily not have glanced at twice. The Midwest, it reported, was suffering from the worst drought in history. Disaster areas had been declared in seven states. In the South unseasonal rains and floods had ruined an estimated seventy percent of crops; in the Midwest rainmakers had failed utterly.

Drought, an ancient enemy more devastating than war. Man had learned to create rain, and now he had learned to create drought. The sinister implications gave Vencel the same lost feeling he had experienced when he first heard of the atomic bomb.

Suddenly he was acutely conscious of the booming water in Lime Creek Canyon. At least another two days to drain the lake. . . .

Vencel rose suddenly and went into the kitchen. He settled with Mrs. Saunders for what he owed on the cabin. Bader was washing dishes in the three-compartment sink. His arms were brown and powerful. He watched Vencel over his shoulder as he worked.

"Okie's got the key to the lock he put on your cabin." Mrs. Saunders's eyes were troubled. "You don't look good. Have you been eating right since you left here?"

She was an ugly woman, and there seemed always to be perspiration on her face, but the concern in her eyes reminded Vencel of how well she had treated him ever since he first came to the inn. He patted her shoulder. "I'll drop in to see you on my way home."

Speer left the café with him. Collins was telling a story to a tourist who was drinking buttermilk in little sips.

Okie had removed the wheel from the damaged coupé and was working on the fender with a hammer. He stopped to scratch his head before he gave Vencel the key to the lock. "Where's the key to the regular lock?"

"I lost it."

"That'll be two bits. I'm short of those keys."

Vencel paid. He looked at Bader's car in the trees. "Did he bust the radiator boiling it?"

"Burned out three bearing," Okie said. "I offered him fifteen dollars for the car, but he thinks it's worth fixing."

Vencel got his possessions from the cabin. He left the key in the padlock and got into the green sedan with Speer. The lieutenant said, "This time when you go after your car I'm walking with you. One more slip and I'll be retiring from this army a private."

"What about that Bader, Speer? Whose man is he?"

"It's a guess. I hear there's G-2 on the job, we know the F.B.I. is here, and there may be a half-dozen other agencies. It all makes a fine game of blindman's buff."

"That Bader has spent a lot of his time outdoors," Vencel said. "He doesn't look like any kind of agent the government would send out."

"Maybe he is one though. Maybe Raven replaces his boys fast."

"Another thing," Vencel said, "that car he drove. I had one just like it. As long as there was a whiff of oil in it you couldn't burn out a bearing. I thought of asking Okie to start the thing for us, only it would have made him suspicious."

"Don't worry," Speer said. "The bearings are out all right. Nobody overlooks any details in this game."

"Drive down the road."

"No. We're going back to the lake."

"Just a couple of miles. It'll take only a few minutes more."

Speer eyed Vencel sharply. "Just a couple of miles, huh?"

"That will do it."

"I'm up to my neck with the colonel anyway." Speer waited for the traffic to thin away and then he sent the sedan grinding out on the highway in second gear.

Vencel asked, "What about the investigation that salesman was talking about—Catron and the war plant?"

Speer cursed. "It ain't so. White can tell you all about it. It did keep Catron from getting a permanent rank as major general though. Lousy politics!"

They passed a place where part of the old road hugged the hill in an arc. The new highway lay on tangent two feet higher. The old road was tree grown along the shoulders, just wide enough for one car. They went on down to a second place where a section of the old highway made a loop like a handle of a coffeepot.

"Ease off onto that," Vencel said. There was a spring with a pipe on the old section of the road. Picnickers frequently stopped beside it. Vencel walked the length of the arc, kicking at fading paper cartons and beer cans.

"No dice," he said. "Head up the road to that other turnout."

Vencel found what he was looking for on the other abandoned stretch of road. It startled him to know that he had made a shrewd guess that proved right. There in the middle of the road was a blackness that had made a greasy mush of the dust.

"Bader?" Speer said. "You think he drained his oil here so his car would barely make it into Okie's?"

"I'll bet on it. It gave him a legitimate excuse for being where he is." Now that he had made a minor discovery Vencel did not know what to do about it, other than to tell Catron and Raven.

They drove up to the junction of the logging road with the highway. Speer ran the sedan down the shoulder of the highway and walked up the old trace with Vencel. Raven was standing close to Vencel's car, a notebook in his hand.

He said, "You didn't move the car, Vencel?"

"I didn't even start it."

"What were you doing down the road where you moved the brush and rocks?"

"Making room to turn."

Raven looked at the grass. It showed that it had been trampled but it gave no other evidence of the struggle Vencel and Harper had waged.

"Go ahead and take it," Raven said.

Once more Vencel looked under the hood before he was ready to touch the starter. Raven watched him without expression. "There's a new waiter at Okie's," Vencel said. He told Raven about the oil on the abandoned road.

"Thanks," Raven said.

Speer drove behind Vencel on the way to the three-gear pool. Sergeant Radetsky took charge of the cars. "They just hauled that dead guy away, Lieutenant. What's going on here anyway?"

"In this outfit did we ever know?" Speer said.

Vencel and Speer went up the mountain in a jeep. Once more the rush of hot air above black timber gave Vencel a queasy feeling. The sentry on the front ridge stopped them with his challenge. The first time up they had not been challenged, Vencel recalled. Things were screwing down. He looked at Blue Peak. The filthy tinge of color above it still stained the sky. The lake did not seem an inch lower, although when the jeep stopped at the motor pool Vencel heard the thundering water at the dam.

Speer went toward the headquarters tent as soon as Lieutenant White stepped down from one of the radio trailers. "My shift with you now," White said. "The colonel really belched about almost losing you."

"What will he do to Speer?"

"Nothing. How can he? Speer and I are the only two men here that he trusts."

CHAPTER FIVE

At dusk Clement Raven sat in his tent with Rudy Trichak, looking at a stack of statements wherein there could be falsehood. If it was there, Raven so far had not been able to touch even the beginning of it.

"A .45," he murmured. "Of course that's only the doctor's preliminary guess so far. He'll have more tomorrow. A noise like that should have rocked all over the mountain, Trichak."

Trichak said, "Apparently it did. Those who were farther away from the dozer had a better chance to hear it than those who were close. Vencel heard it, if his story is true. Speer and Radetsky heard it at the three-gear pool, and the sentry on the front ridge says he heard it. He *could* be going along with us just for the hell of being in on something besides guard duty."

Raven thought about Glassner and Cartwright, Sillcott's right-hand men. Their security checks had been made first in 1941, and again not more than a month ago. All evidence said they were clean.

"Where's the leak, Trichak? We knew from the start Harper would be spotted quickly. But how did someone up here know that he was coming to the lake this morning?"

"Someone up here?"

"Why wasn't he killed on the logging road?" Raven asked. "You know how I feel about conjecture, Trichak. Too much dependence on it is fatal, but still there are times when that's all there is." He might have been apologizing. "Harper was to leave his post only for two reasons, when he had vital information, or when he knew he had been identified.

"For one of those two reasons he started here. It was a desperate stop they made, an impromptu act from utter necessity. The location indicates that much. But I do not accept the premise"—he mouthed the word as if it tasted bad—"that the meeting was entirely accidental.

"There were circumstances that favored the act, such as the road equipment being where it was, but when a shrewd man takes advantage of such circumstances, you cannot call them accidental. Where is the leak, Trichak?"

Trichak shook his head. He knew better than to make conjecture, even when Raven had given left-handed approval of it.

Raven read Vencel's statement again. He had questioned ten men that afternoon, including the road-equipment operators. He could find no fracture anywhere, but words were nothing.

Evidence was the test, evidence was sacred.

That Vencel had discovered a jawlifter in his creel, with Lieutenants White and Speer substantiating the fact, was not indisputable evidence in Clement Raven's book that someone had tried to kill Vencel: it was merely proof that there had been a lethal device in the creel.

"When do we get the report on Vencel?" Raven asked.

Trichak glanced at his watch. "The radiomen may have it now." When he rose the harsh light of the gasoline lantern lay a gray sheen on the broad Slavic contour of his face.

Raven eyed him thoughtfully. "Until we know otherwise, Trichak, we'll assume that Harper's death was not a long premeditated step, but rather an emergency that they came against almost without warning."

"It'll be the first time one of their plans on this job wasn't laid ten years in advance," Trichak said grimly. He went out into the warm night.

Raven forgot him instantly. Slowly, Raven considered the two men working road equipment that morning. Colonel Catron himself had ordered the pull blade to work the road. There was no evidence to indicate that the killer could have taken premeditated advantage of the noise of the dozer, or of the obliteration the blade had made of all marks in the road.

No, the evidence was not there; but after several moments Raven made a note.

Then, one by one, he examined the statements again. The estimates of the time of the shot by those who said they had heard it varied as much as a half hour. Raven made a careful note on the sentry's statement.

Swiftly, deftly, he sketched the road from Grizzly Lake to the highway, and then he put in such topographical details as he held pertinent to the problem in his mind. Colonel Catron would have been astonished at the accuracy of the map. Raven pored over his work, a calm man settling one point at a time. His intelligence was like a cold steel probe thrusting gently. Several times he made negative motions with his head.

Trichak returned with a radio message. Raven glanced at it briefly. "Give it to Dr. Runyan, and tell him I'll be over to see him in twenty minutes."

When he was at the doorway of the tent Trichak said, "Just for once, couldn't it have been something out of pattern? I know we haven't run into anything like that so far . . . No, I guess it wasn't."

"That's right, it wasn't," Raven said. Trichak was a good man, but he was becoming awed by the cold-blooded mechanics of the plan. He would be relieved if he could discover passion or anger or fear—anything that would prove a weak human element involved instead of faceless cogs. "There's no one drifting around the edges of this thing without a definite assignment. I don't mean they can't or won't change pace when an emergency arises—Harper was that, I think—but still his death was part of the system.

"He was to be killed only if he became dangerous. Like Silvers, the F.C.C. man, he perhaps found evidence; therefore, he did become dangerous. Harper almost reached us, Trichak. There was where the pattern slipped before they retrieved things by killing him."

"They!" Trichak said bitterly.

"We'll have names, in time. The hardness of the whole covering will start breaking when we can put our hands on men."

"In time," Trichak said. "My old man owns a farm in Kansas, Raven. I know what's happening there. I don't have to read the papers."

"This may be another deal where we get nothing but scraps." Raven shook his head gently. "Catron knows it, and he's facing ruin, the way the army's put it to him. We'll blow this machine up, Trichak. Of course we will, but God knows when we'll ever get our hands on one intact. The Midwest may be a desert before that happens." His voice hardened. "So you and I will face that fact. We won't make any bad mistakes by being overanxious and acting too quickly."

When Trichak left, Raven locked the papers in his field desk. For one of the few times in his life he was facing a task without a shred of evidence to guide him. Vencel was the obvious man, the known man who could have killed Harper. Clement Raven was not one to reject the obvious simply because it was the obvious.

The gun was a problem, but Vencel was a tall, powerful man. With a light cord that could have been carried in his pocket he could have hurled a .45 no telling how far. Trichak had not proved the theory, but there were men looking on the hill even now, and tomorrow others would continue the search until the gun was found or until Raven was satisfied that there was none.

It was not that Raven thought Vencel guilty of killing Harper, but neither did he accept him as innocent. Until there was positive evidence one way or another, Vencel was merely part of an equation.

Raven looked at his watch. He had time for a short walk before seeing Dr. Runyan. He went down to the lake and stood there a few minutes. The black water was slapping the shore. On the raft the sonar men were still at work. The bottom of Grizzly Lake would hold no secrets when they had finished. Blue Peak was a massive pile of blackness, but the great slide-rock channel down the central face made a faint gray streak in the night.

Men in there with their devilish instruments? It must be so, although Raven himself had no evidence of it. His job was to cripple all outside activity of the enemy. Of that he did have evidence.

A man on the raft laughed as he came from the canvas doghouse. Light fell in a pale streak on the water. No panic, no tension, Raven thought; and yet if Sillcott was right, here was the pin point of defeat of the greatest democratic nation on earth, of a way of life all over the earth.

Raven thought of what he had said to Trichak about the time involved. It was still true; but as Raven stood staring at the silent mountain an eerie coldness washed past the barriers of his hard intelligence. He was afraid. He wanted to hurry when haste would not serve. It seemed to him that he could feel a rippling of tension, a fearful struggle under the quiet layers of the night.

He turned and went quickly up the hill.

CHAPTER SIX

LIEUTENANT WHITE STOPPED IN THE ACT of daubing sunburn ointment on his blistered face. He looked at Vencel lying on a cot, and all at once the lieutenant's eyes held the cold fighting expression of Colonel Catron.

"Where did you hear that—from Sillcott?" White asked.

"No. A salesman today at Okie's place."

"Yes, Catron was dragged into an investigation. His first wife went overboard in her political leanings. Meetings were held at her house. Some of the people who came there were burrowed into the State Department like warbles into the back of a rabbit.

"It was a hell of a thing for an officer's wife to get into. Catron didn't even know what she was doing until one of his friends told him. It was too late then. The State Department scandal broke wide open. Catron was hauled into it by the politicians and the newspapers. They made the usual hash of facts and he took a bad beating."

"Why'd you ask if Sillcott told me?" Vencel asked. "I didn't suppose the guy talked to the common herd."

"Ask him some questions about Catron and find out." White smeared ointment on the fiery red skin along his hair line. "This isn't the first weather-wrecker we've gone against. Did the colonel mention that to you?"

"He said they've been blowing themselves up."

"Twice. There was one installation in a cave in Georgia. Sillcott is the man who first established that weather interference actually existed. Give the devil credit, he's the greatest electronics brain in the country. We had a go at this Georgia cave, same mixed-up authority, everybody tugging in seven directions.

"We couldn't get it. The guys who were operating it literally pulverized everything when we were close. Sillcott's report—and he has influence—said that the engineers loused up, that we should have recovered the installation without damage. Catron's version was different, of course, but the fact remained that we failed to do what we were supposed to do."

"How many men did you lose?" Vencel asked.

"Nine." White's face was bitter. "I give Sillcott his point. He has to have the weather-wrecker to figure out how to combat it, unless his men put in years of research, which they're doing now, I understand. But he goes completely blind to the practical problem of getting at men who are burrowed underground with orders to die there." White flung his arm in the direction of Blue Peak.

"You're an engineer, Vencel. You see what I mean?"

"I do. It's impossible."

Lieutenant Speer came in. There was a fresh, trim look of competence about him. "The lake has dropped thirty-seven inches. The farther she drops the faster she goes, and then we start digging for rats." He flung himself down on a cot. "Doc Runyan wants to see you right away, Vencel."

"What for?"

"To see if you're fit for duty, I guess."

Dr. Runyan was a lean, hard-bitten major. He asked Vencel a dozen preliminary questions and then told him to strip. He made Vencel stand on one leg and then the other, do deep bends, squat, and touch the floor with his knees stiff.

He examined Vencel's teeth thoroughly. He took particular interest in Vencel's hip, feeling the scars, probing with his fingers while Vencel moved the hip in its socket.

"That's an interesting piece of work there," the major said. "Any trouble with it?"

"I'd rather have the original one," Vencel said. "Aren't the teeth enough, Doctor?"

"Enough?"

"For identification, enough to prove I'm Platt Vencel and not somebody else."

Major Runyan sat down and began to write. "That's all, Vencel."

Vencel dressed and went outside. They should have been able to check his fingerprints, he thought; but fingerprint cards could not be sent by radio, while surgical and dental data could. Raven was behind it, he guessed.

Suddenly he realized there was something wrong. He stood listening. The sound of water at the dam had ceased. He walked toward the front ridge. At the edge of camp a sentry stopped him and turned him back.

Both White and Speer were gone when Vencel returned to his quarters. They did not come back until after he was in bed, rousing him enough so that he was aware that the silence at the dam still held.

In the dead of night Speer shook him violently. "Come on! Come on! You've got business with the colonel."

A few minutes later Vencel was stumbling through the night toward the headquarters tent. Electric lanterns were bobbing in the dark. The radio trailers were lighted and manned. A jeep went digging up the hill toward the front ridge.

With the exception of White and Catron, the seven men in the colonel's tent were all civilians. Sillcott was saying, "It's not the type, Catron. The signal——"

"I want it just the same," Catron said. "Come here, Vencel." The colonel held a pencil slanted into a forest service map. "Do you know that position?"

The names and lines on the map sorted themselves in Vencel's brain. He blinked at the harsh reflection of the gasoline lantern. "That's on the Middle Fork, about a mile below the Lucky Dog mine."

"Can you drive there?" Catron asked.

"Yes."

Raven said, "The map shows no road." His thin brown hair was untidy. His eyes were red. He was wearing a thin sweater.

"You can drive there," Vencel said. He had fished the Middle Fork the week before. The road not shown on the map had been built by a logging outfit during the war.

"Let's go," Catron said.

Sillcott said, "You're being misled, Catron. I——"

"Ride with me, Vencel." The colonel was already leaving the tent.

Catron was no jeep driver. He was a maniac on a mountain road that had not been a road a week before. He herded the jeep like a midget racer. In the back seat with Raven, Vencel got the impression that the jeep went into curves before the headlights had a chance to show the way.

Raven was scared. Vencel knew it from the way the man held himself, from the way he gripped the side and shifted weight on curves. It was a relief to know that something could upset Raven, but Vencel himself was too nervous to gloat over the discovery.

"Take it easy!" Raven said. The protest came as if jolted out of him.

If anything, the colonel put on more steam. Raven grunted when the jeep took a sharp turn so fast the rear tires threw small rocks and dirt into the trees a hundred feet below the road. They caught up with another vehicle. Three soldiers in the back twisted around to look, their faces white and blurry in the bounce of Catron's lights. The colonel yelled for the driver ahead to go faster.

The driver went a little faster and that was all. Raven began to release some of his death grips.

"Why is the water shut down?" Vencel asked.

"Catron's idea to get some action out of the transmitter," Raven said. "When he started draining the lake, a radio warned the men in the mountain. At least, there was a message. Last night he shut the water off to see what would happen. There was another signal, but Sillcott says it was not from the same transmitter as before."

Catron glanced back. "Of course it's a feint."

"Watch the road!" Raven said. "My God!"

Sitting beside Catron, White was nervous, too. He had reached toward the steering wheel, but the colonel did not seem to notice. "It's a feint, sure," Catron said, "but I still want the operator."

The point Catron had indicated on the map was only about a mile and a half from the highway near the high bridge. Vencel said, "The radio operator can be home in bed by the time we get to the Lucky Dog gulch."

"The road was blocked six minutes after the signal," Raven said. "It's the only road, isn't it?"

"Yeah." The radio man had little chance then of getting back to the highway tonight, Vencel thought. He probably did not intend to make the try. Lucky Dog gulch lay between great timbered ridges that ran toward Blue Peak and there was plenty of cover.

"Pin him down until daylight," White said. "Then maybe we'll get a look at him."

They skidded into the three-gear pool. Dust rose in a cloud. Two men ran from the radio trailer. Speer shot across the headlights of a waiting sedan and reached Catron's jeep first. "Shall I cover the pass, sir?"

"The same spots," Catron said. "Break the detail."

Speer ran back to the sedan. When it boomed away, throwing dust, Vencel saw that it was jammed with soldiers.

One of the men from the radio trailer said, "I'll need the direction-finder unit that's blocking the road as soon as I can get it, Colonel."

"We'll relieve it immediately, Matlock." The colonel called to White, who had leaped out to keep traffic coming down the hill from turning into the pool. "All set, Jack?"

"Yes, sir."

Catron spun the jeep around. Raven grunted. Vencel wondered why he wasn't riding with his own men, if they were in on the affair.

The colonel stopped ahead of a black sedan that was thrust into the entrance of the Lucky Dog road. Two men came out of the dark trees. "No fresh car tracks in the road," one of them said.

"Matlock wants you to report back to him at the three-gear pool," Catron said. The two men got into the sedan and left.

"F.C.C.?" Vencel asked Raven.

"That's right."

Three carloads of soldiers who had followed Catron's jeep from the three-gear pool were waiting. Lieutenant White came forward for orders. Catron was crisp and terse. White took most of the detail up the old road. The sedans cruised away.

Two huge freight trucks came down the pass against compression. The drivers glanced idly as they passed the jeep. The freighters went growling on down the highway, their headlights gleaming on raw cutbanks and motionless aspens. Catron stared at the receding blurs of the running lights.

"They'll be checked at the lower road block," Raven said.

Catron took two .30 carbines from the jeep. "It's what goes on between the road blocks that worries me." He gave a carbine to Vencel. Raven shook his head when the colonel offered him the second gun.

"When did the road blocks start?" Vencel asked. He checked the magazine of the carbine.

"Two days ago," Catron said. "It's the state highway patrol, making vehicle inspections. I think Raven has a man or two among them, haven't you, Raven?"

Raven ignored the question. "Where would you go, Vencel, if you were back there near the Lucky Dog?"

"I'd lay low." Vencel glanced at a black ridge to the right of the road. Sharpe's Ridge it was, and it ran all the way back to the Lucky Dog, every foot of the top choked with dead timber. It would take three hours, in daylight, to come down the top of it on foot.

Catron got into the jeep. "I'll be along the highway. Stay far enough back in the trees to be out of sight. I've been reprimanded enough for drawing attention to this operation." He drove away, going upgrade, and for once he was not speeding.

Now there was no light. Vencel and Raven felt their way into the trees at the edge of the old road. On their left the middle fork of Lime Creek was running noisily.

"How about the stream itself?" Raven asked. "Would that be a possible route?"

Vencel brushed against a spruce branch. The needles gave back a stiff resistance that spoke of brittleness. "You can scarcely stand up in the creek in daylight. How can they tell where a radio signal came from?"

Raven's voice came gently from the darkness, "There are direction finders spotted all over the mountains, with operators doing duty around the clock. They get cross-fixes and triangulate so quickly you'd be surprised."

Vencel looked at the cold stars. They were the only cold things about the night. He wore no coat, and yet he was sweating. Dimly on the skyline stood the wedge top of Blue Peak grim with silence. No sound came from up the road where the detail had gone, strung out in pairs to prevent anyone slipping in behind them after they had passed.

"You had the doctor check my identity," Vencel said.

"Yes."

"Satisfied?"

"So far," Raven said. "Would that ridge there on the right be a logical route?"

"No. In daylight you'd be hours climbing over fallen timber to get through up there. What makes everyone think the guy is anxious to get back to the highway? That would increase his chances of getting nailed. Otherwise, he could hide out around the Lucky Dog for a month."

"True. But once on the highway a man can offer anyone a hundred legitimate excuses for being there. He doesn't have to hide then."

The darkness and the silence began to work on Vencel. He wished now that he had asked to go with the detail. Walking would be better than standing, waiting for something to happen. After a while he said, "I'm going up on the ridge."

"I thought you said it was all down timber."

"It is, but from the point, when it gets daylight, you can see a lot of country."

"He won't be moving when it's light," Raven said. "You'd better stay here, Vencel."

"Is that why you came along—to keep me under observation?"

"Not entirely. Go on up your ridge if you think it's the thing to do."

It was a rough climb in the dark, rock outcrops, down timber and brush. Vencel angled back and forth until the dim light break in the trees ahead told him he was near the top. He came then into an open space at the point of the ridge. Straight ahead the firs were black. Behind him the highway ran in great, wide curves, illuminated in bursts by the lights of cars.

When down-coming vehicles sped across the high bridge, turning into the next curve, their lights swept out across the aspens and touched momentarily on the aluminum roof at Okie's place. Now and then a sedan went by at a slower pace. Catron's patrol cars, Vencel guessed.

It occurred to him that the timber outfit which had rebuilt the Lucky Dog road might have swamped out a haulage route when they logged this ridge. That was something that he should have mentioned to Catron. For a long way up Sharpe's Ridge the side that sloped to the creek was steep and rough. It was possible that the loggers had worked from the top of the ridge, hauling toward the Lucky Dog until they found an easy way to drop to the road.

The thought nagged Vencel. He went ahead toward the darkness of the trees until he came against a tangle. He backed up and tried again. The click of a small rock behind him brought him around. He punched his carbine toward the sound.

In that instant the savage grunt of human exertion at his back told him that he had fallen for a trick that was old when cavemen used it. He spun around. Something crashed into the carbine barrel, driving it upward. The gun went off, a sharp spat that scarcely lived before it was lost on Vencel. A flash bulb exploded in his head. And that was all.

When he began to come to life, waves of nausea were ripping through him. His mouth was dry and bitter. He got on his hands and knees and fell. Someone far away was calling his name and he could not answer.

After a while the call came again. "Vencel!" The sound was without hope, as if he no longer lived.

Vencel sat up slowly, gripping the back of his neck with one hand, holding his forehead with the other.

"Vencel!" It was Raven's voice somewhere on the side of the ridge. Slowly Vencel got on his feet. He staggered and kicked the carbine. When he stooped to pick it up, fumbling in the darkness, he nearly fell.

"Here!" he yelled. His head began to clear. "On the highway! Watch it down there! He got past me!"

"What?" Raven called.

Vencel repeated the message, slowly this time. The effort made his head beat with pain. He heard rocks clatter as Raven turned and started down the hill. Dead branches cracked. There was a thump, and Raven cursed when he fell. And then he was up again, crashing down the hill.

A sedan went up the highway, moving slowly. Raven yelled, but the driver did not hear. There might yet be a chance that the man had not reached the highway. Vencel went to where the ridge broke sharply at the end. He knelt there, trying to peer through the blackness. Far down the pass pinpoints of light showed cars coming up, and from somewhere up the pass a truck was making a heavy sound.

It was only minutes before the truck came in sight on the bridge. It rocked past the white concrete of the guard rail and threw its light into the curve ahead and then it was grinding on toward Okie's place. Darkness closed in behind it.

Vencel knew that the man had got away.

When the next slow-moving sedan came down, Raven flagged it to a stop. He leaped in. A spotlight bloomed and moved in jerky focus as it swept the end of the ridge. For a quarter of a mile Raven searched one side of the road and then put about and came up the highway, with the spotlight probing the downhill side.

Up-coming cars flashed by, whining in the night.

Maybe they would pick him up at the road block, Vencel thought dully; but he knew that they would not. The game was too smoothly run for any man to blunder into a road block.

The sedan came back. Raven got out and stood in the glare of the headlights. "Come on down, Vencel."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DAWN BROUGHT the first taste of dry heat. There was no dew on the grass, and cars moving on the road disturbed a fine film of dust. Once more Vencel heard the booming of heavy water in the canyon. The gates at the dam were open again.

They stood out of sight of the highway, a short distance up the Lucky Dog road. Catron said, "All right, we missed, but it won't go on forever."

Lieutenant White shook his head. "I covered that skid road on top as soon as Sergeant Enders discovered it, but it was too late then." He pointed up Sharpe's Ridge. "It runs within a quarter of a mile of here."

Vencel leaned against a car, looking at the bright nick in the barrel of his carbine.

"He must have been carrying an ax," Raven said. He took the gun and gave it to one of his men. There were two others, Rudy Trichak and an agent named Walters, taking a plaster cast of a footprint where the man had come down the ridge and struck the borrow pit. "You couldn't tell a thing about him, Vencel?"

Vencel shook his head. It hurt. He had made a fool of himself this night. First, by not guessing that there might be a haulage route on top of the ridge. Hindsight made the mistake loom very large. Second, by being deceived by the simplest of tricks, a rock tossed behind him.

Raven watched him thoughtfully.

In a way they shared the failure, Vencel thought. Raven had heard the shot and started up the ridge when Vencel did not answer his call. From a military standpoint—and Vencel supposed the F.B.I. should operate that way too—Raven should have covered the highway no matter what happened on the ridge. The man had been waiting up there to make his break, and they had let him through.

If the thought bothered Raven, he did not show it. His face was skinned and his clothes were torn from falling on the hill. His hair was rumpled, and his eyes were red from lack of sleep; but none of the steady burning determination in him was displaced. He studied Vencel for several moments and then he walked away, taking Trichak with him.

"Pull the details in, White," Catron ordered. "Keep one sedan with two men on the highway. Check with Speer, and let me know if anything happened at the road block on top of the pass." He got into his jeep. "I'll be at the hamburger joint down the road for the next half hour. Come on, Vencel, we'll see if coffee will help your head."

"Okie's place, sir?" White hesitated. "Vencel is supposed to be fishing over the pass."

"That was a feeble thought we had," the colonel said. "For whatever our cover-up at Okie's was worth, it couldn't have fooled a Mongolian idiot. If there's anyone around that place we want, he knows more about us than we know about ourselves. Come on, Vencel."

Before the colonel had backed out to the highway, Lieutenant Speer pulled up in a sedan. A long-jawed private carrying a carbine walked with him to the jeep.

"We got a radio and an operator, sir, at the campground two miles under the pass." A black stubble of beard was showing on Speer's jaws. His eyes were dark, unblinking.

"Go on," Catron said.

"Torchman here was assigned to cover the campground," Speer said. "The radio sent a message, a little longer than usual this time, and the F.C.C. men got a fix fast. I caught their message on it and made a run for the campground. The guy was clearing out. We had to take him."

The private nodded vigorously.

"You killed him?" Catron asked.

Speer nodded. "We tried to cripple the car."

Raven came up the road in time to hear the question and answer.

"It was a man named Collins," Speer said. "Me and Vencel saw him at Okie's."

"Collins? Oh, yes, the novelty salesman." Raven did not seem surprised. "Who's up there now, Speer?"

"The F.C.C. men, all over the place. Sillcott. He wants them to give him the radio."

"Naturally," Catron said. "We should have had the man alive, Speer."

Speer nodded gloomily. "I know it."

Private Torchman said, "I yelled for him to stop, sir. The lieutenant yelled. He tried to get away."

Catron nodded. "Have a full report for me within an hour, Speer." He looked at Raven. "You want to go up there now, I suppose? Speer will take you."

"In a minute." Raven went back to his men.

Speer said, "Okie came down the highway with a wrecked car a few minutes ahead of me. A state patrolman was right behind him, but——"

"I'll look into it," Catron said. "Move the sedan out of the way."

Collins, a fat salesman who laughed and told stories, and now he was dead at the campground under the pass, and he had been a part of this whole foul invasion. Raven had accepted the fact without a stir, and that indicated how wide and deep his knowledge was. The Blue Peak forces must be only a small part of the organizations battling the terror in the mountain. And yet, it seemed to Vencel, that they were getting nowhere.

Collins. He could not get the man out of his mind. If he had been one of the enemy, then anybody might be. Basic trust in human beings was a poor background for this business, Vencel thought.

The colonel pulled into the parking space at Okie's. He did not get out at once but sat looking at a smashed convertible on the winch of Okie's tow car. A pale young man whose glasses had cut the bridge of his nose looked tired and miserable as he answered the questions of a highway patrolman who was resting his summons pad on the hood of the car. After a while he tore a sheet from the pad and gave it to the young man.

"A ticket! I get a ticket! The guy crowded me clear to the outside of the curve! You guys ought to be around when those things happen."

The patrolman said, "You skidded a hundred and sixty-three feet on your side of the road. You swerved across it and skidded eighty feet on the other side before you piled into the bank. That figures speeding and reckless driving." He was patient and he was adamant.

The driver of the wrecked car cursed. He put the ticket into his pocket and went into the café.

"Sergeant!" Catron said.

The patrolman came across the parking space, putting his summons book in his pocket as he walked. "How are you this morning, Colonel?"

"Did your road block turn up any stolen government property?"

The patrolman shook his head. "All clean."

Catron nodded. "What time did you send for the wrecker?"

The patrolman looked at his pad. "Two-twenty. I came down and got Okie out of bed."

Two-twenty. That was close to the time Vencel was getting himself clobbered on Sharpe's Ridge. Not Okie then. Vencel never had suspected Okie of being involved, but then he remembered Collins. You could not trust anyone.

"Legitimate accident?" the colonel asked.

"Hell no! No accident is legitimate when you're hitting seventy miles an hour on a mountain road. You're just asking for it, like that punk. Twenty feet farther and he'd have gone over a hundred-foot drop."

"I guess you get a lot of them," Catron said. "I just wondered, Sergeant."

The patrolman went into the café. Catron still did not get out of the jeep. "The main point, of course, is the weather-wrecker itself. I've got patrols gouging all over the mountains, just in case. That thing is back of one of Olson's tunnels, Vencel. It's got to be."

There was a tiredness again in Catron's face, but his eyes were hard and thoughtful. Vencel suspected that there was a bitterness in him and a devotion to duty that made him unhappy.

"I would dynamite the lake," Catron said, "against orders to the contrary, but my position in Washington is already precarious. If I do so I'll be removed. Then there will be another commander, with a different theory, perhaps. That will cost more time. It'll put us one step closer to the day when you'll see cars coming up this road with farmers that have given up. You remember the dust-bowl victims, Vencel?"

Vencel nodded.

"Multiply them by ten, a thousand. Refugees from the ugliest war we've ever faced. Did Raven ever talk to you about it?"

"No."

"He'll scare you if he does. He can paint the whole picture so clearly that you know he's scared himself. I wish there were a few more men like Clement Raven on this job." The colonel swung out of the jeep suddenly. "Show me where the entrance to this cave you wrote about used to be."

They went toward the rim of the canyon, through tall aspens where houses had been when Vencel was a boy. They came to a break in the limestone that led in a winding course toward the canyon. "Right here," Vencel said. "There was a stable on the bank. They forked everything into that gully."

Soil had been washed over the old manure now. Vegetation nearly choked the gully. After a half hour's exploration the colonel said, "If there was an entrance here it sure isn't here any more. Any other places you could get into the cave?"

"Not that I know of." Vencel's hands were stinging from contact with nettles growing rankly in the gully. "You're thinking the radio could be in there?"

"*A* radio. They're expendable, Vencel. They lost one this morning and a man, but that was all planned for long ago. We might have to find a dozen before we could shut off contact with the peak. We won't find them."

"It seems to me that if you did shut off all outside contact, it would throw those guys into a spin. If you've ever been underground very long, Colonel, you know how bad it would be to have a permanent assignment there. When they don't hear from the outside any longer, they'll probably push the plunger."

"That's it," Catron said. "I'd like to keep them happy until I can get at them. That's why I want to catch me a radio operator who knows the code."

"You can't make a man talk if he doesn't want to."

"I can't?" Catron kept staring at Vencel. "I'd like to bet on that."

They went back to the café. Okie was pulling out with the wrecked car. A station wagon and two trucks had stopped. The café was crowded. Vencel gathered from the talk that the men from the station wagon were fishermen headed over the pass. The pale youth of last night's wreck was sitting with a dark-haired girl who was obviously sour about the whole deal.

Vencel went on into the kitchen. Mrs. Saunders was cooking. Three orders were ready to go. "Wash your big mitts," she said, "and grab an apron. The joint is jumping, and Okie can't wait five minutes to get that wreck to town."

Vencel did not ask immediately about Bader. He obeyed Mrs. Saunders's orders and began carrying food into the café. Everybody but the sulky girl and her escort wanted a big breakfast.

Catron was sizing up everybody in the place.

Vencel went back to the kitchen for another cup of coffee. Mrs. Saunders plodded away from the stove. She sat down on a stool beside the butcher block and wiped her forehead.

"Where's Bader?" Vencel asked.

"Oh, hell! He's a union man, that one. He worked an hour or two later than usual last night so he said he wouldn't go to work until eight o'clock this morning." Mrs. Saunders shook her head. "You can't get any decent help these days. I told Okie to bring back another man today, if he could find one."

She moved heavily across the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. She put four teaspoonfuls of sugar in it and went back to her stool. “You through gallivanting around, Vencel? Are you going to stay awhile now?”

“I’m up at Grizzly Lake, giving the army engineers advice about explosion tests.”

“Oh, that. I saw it in the paper. Just another way to spend taxpayers’ money.” Mrs. Saunders sighed. “I wish I could get another girl like Edith. These men——”

“How long does Bader have to work to pay for getting his car fixed?”

“I don’t know. Okie hasn’t touched it yet. I know what’ll happen. There’ll be a big argument about how much it’s going to cost, and Okie will wind up with another pile of junk out there in the trees. When we first settled here we talked of having just the café and a few cabins, but Okie, he thinks he’s a mechanic.” Mrs. Saunders sighed. “Oh well, he ain’t a drinking man, at least.”

Mrs. Saunders’s left arm, brown-speckled, hard, was resting on the butcher block. Absently she toyed with a cleaver, tapping the flat side of it against the block. It was a heavy cleaver, gray along the sharp edge, a greasy metallic color on the blade.

For a moment Vencel could not take his eyes away from it. He was glad that Mrs. Saunders did not notice his sudden fascination. He watched her cross the room to drop her cup into the sink. She walked as if her feet hurt her. They were small feet, encased in run-over house slippers with sheepskin cuffs. She weighed, Vencel estimated, one hundred and eighty pounds.

He removed his apron. “Shall I go see if I can kick Bader out for you?” It was only a few minutes after six.

“He’s up most likely. He says he’s used to getting up around five o’clock every day. Yesterday when me and Okie got up, he was wandering around in the trees.” Mrs. Saunders began to wash dishes. “He needs exercise, that one. There isn’t enough to do here.”

“I’ll go tell him you’re rushed.”

“Go ahead, but it won’t do no good. If I could get another girl like that Edith, I wouldn't put up with no men helping in the café at all. They don't catch on. They're just as likely to stand around picking their noses when——"

"I'll get him," Vencel said. "Nose and all."

Catron was helping himself to another cup of coffee from the urn when Vencel went into the café. The girl was examining her face in a mirror, patting her hair. She put the mirror away and said to the highway patrolman, "You *were* going to take us back to Midway, I suppose?"

"Sure will. When I finish my breakfast."

Vencel went on out. He looked at the superstructure above the café. It was not a large room up there. An outside stairs led to it from the back. There was a long window on the highway side, from which Okie peered down at night to size up the appearance of anyone who stopped and called for service after the place was closed.

There was no smudge of smoke from the little windcap on the pipe that rose above the trailer in the trees. Vencel knocked on the door. "Bader!" There was no response. He tried again and then he opened the door.

No one was there. The trailer sagged under Vencel's weight as he stepped from the wooden block outside to the cracked linoleum of the floor. The bunk was neatly made. Above it, in the end that faced the highway, the curved glass from the rear window of a car was set into the wall. It gave a good view of the gasoline signs leaning against Okie's garage and the pumps in front of the café.

Under the bunk was a cheap metal suitcase, an old one with dented corners and scratched paint. Vencel pulled it out and looked inside. There was a jumble of men's clothing, some of it soiled, a pair of shoes, and three paper-backed books with lurid covers. A letter had been used to mark a place in one of the books. It was addressed to John Harper, General Delivery, Midway, Colorado.

Vencel did not look inside the envelope. He knew the letter would be a harmless missive to substantiate the role Harper had played.

There was nothing in the trailer to indicate that Bader had ever lived in it. An ashtray on a shelf near the bunk held nothing. The thin composition lining of the walls was springing away from the framework. A mouse rustled industriously behind the lining.

Vencel went back to the café.

The truck drivers were in their cabs, waiting for traffic to clear. The shuddering power of the diesels washed against the trees when the freighters pulled away. The couple who had wrecked the convertible came out and got into the patrol car. When the sergeant started toward his car Vencel said, "See you just a minute?"

He did not know the sergeant. He knew the two patrolmen who worked out of Midway, but this officer must be from another division. He was a freckle-faced man with a fighter's stubby jaw. "Yeah?" he asked.

"When you got Okie out to go after that wreck was his wife here?"

"Sure."

"How do you know?"

"I heard him talking to her. She was complaining about being waked up in the middle of the night. He told her to go back to sleep and shut up. Okie would get up in the middle of pneumonia to make a tow fee." The sergeant took Vencel for someone who had a right to ask. "Does that cover it?"

"That's it. Thanks."

Mrs. Saunders was gathering dishes off the counter when Vencel went inside. "Bader's gone," he said.

"He'll show up. He's out getting exercise."

"You're sure he was here last night?"

"Sure," Mrs. Saunders said. "There was a light in the trailer when Okie and me turned in about midnight." She yawned and went into the kitchen with the dishes.

Vencel had an angling view of the kitchen. He could see the butcher block and the cleaver on it and long knives in a chromed rack along the side. Imagination, he told himself. Of course Mrs. Saunders was tired. She worked like a horse around the place, a heavy woman on her feet all day, with short hours of rest during the tourist season.

Catron was reading a paper one of the truck drivers had left. He brought it with him and dropped it casually in front of Vencel when he walked to the cash register. Drought. The headlines were not big, but they were constant, Vencel knew.

He read a paragraph. Cattle were at a prewar low. They were being dumped on the market from drought areas where the grass was rapidly disappearing.

Reaching for his wallet, Catron looked at Vencel bleakly.

Mrs. Saunders waddled from the kitchen. She took Catron's money and said cheerfully, "You gentlemen come back." She was wiping the counter when they went out.

"So Bader skipped," the colonel said. "Raven will be interested in that."

"He wasn't Raven's man?"

"Raven says no. You heard me mention once, I think, that it would be a help if everybody knew what the other fellow was doing. Bader shows up here. Speer told me about it at once. I haven't the men to watch Bader, and I can't get reports from the agencies who do have the men to do that sort of thing."

"Army intelligence? Why don't they——"

"They're here, one or two that I know of." Catron gave Vencel an unreadable look. "It would seem that I can't be trusted with all details. If this were in all ways a pure military operation and the same restraint existed, I would have no choice but to resign."

He was neither complaining nor speaking bitterly. He was stating a fact.

He was, Vencel thought, the only leader with previous experience in trying to get a weather-wrecker, so he was trusted to that extent, but his two failures and the investigation in his background clouded someone's trust in him enough to cripple his liaison with all the agencies who were trying to help. And then, his relations with Sillcott made matters worse.

The water in the canyon made a steady roar. The lake was draining, but time for Colonel Catron was also draining away.

"This place has been suspected?" Vencel asked.

"Of course. I imagine it's being watched right now." Catron looked casually at the black timber above the aspen fringes all around Okie's place. "I came here this morning to size up the place myself. It looks perfectly normal, doesn't it? But you'll have to allow it's the natural contact point for the men operating those radios."

"It's a good spot, yes." Vencel hesitated. "Was that a man's track up there where Trichak was making the plaster cast?"

"Yes," Catron said. "About size eleven, I'd say. Why?"

"I just wondered." The idea that Mrs. Saunders, that great hulk of a woman, could have been on Sharpe's Ridge in the dead of night was completely dispelled now. The thought was laughable, and Vencel was ashamed to mention it.

Catron said, "I noticed her feet, too. Very small for a woman that size." He smiled briefly.

They piled into the jeep and Catron wheeled it onto the highway. "I think I can trust you now, Vencel."

"What do you mean?"

"I never thought you killed Harper, you understand. Raven may think so. Neither was I certain that anyone tried to kill you, up until now. I took a long chance on you because I needed you to help me with Olson's tunnels. I still do. Last night you made a bad mistake that convinced me you're all right."

"How do you figure?"

"You let a man get away. That man was taking a desperate chance in getting to the highway. He knew it and so would you, if you'd been on his side. You would have killed the man, Vencel, before risking the chance that we would get him.

"The fact that you nearly got killed yourself would be a very weak point in your favor if I weren't familiar with the way these agents operate. They don't use clever little stalls. They kill the weak sisters in their organization quickly and efficiently. Those who are likely to falter are marked well in advance. When their weakness makes them dangerous to a plan—that's all. You would have killed the man last night if you'd been one of them."

"I tried to shoot him."

"If you had, it would have wound you up with me," Catron said. "Of course it would have been established in time that you're not one of the enemy, but I wouldn't have trusted you any longer during the operation."

For a moment Catron's reasoning was cold clear, but the more Vencel thought about it the less clarity there seemed to be in it; but perhaps it was lucid enough to the colonel. Catron was not a simple soldier with the one-track military mind and other qualities so loosely attributed to men who spend their lives in the army.

The colonel cut across the yellow line and sped around the two trucks that had left Okie's just ahead of them. There was a curve ahead. Vencel squirmed until they were in the clear.

"You and Raven," Catron said. "Do you know that man is scared to death of an automobile?" He forgot the remark before Vencel had a chance to comment. "Raven should never have gone to help you last night, even if he had known you were being killed by inches. He made a mistake that would get him a court-martial if he were under my command."

The military man was speaking now, Vencel thought.

They drove to the public campground below the pass. It lay across the main run of South Lime Creek. For a quarter of a mile heavy forest service tables and stone cooking sites were scattered among the jack pines. Vencel saw five or six tents of campers.

"Yes, it should be closed," Catron said, as if divining Vencel's thoughts. "Leaving it open is part of the program of not drawing attention to the area."

Lieutenant Speer and Sillcott were facing each other across a transmitter on the ground near the rear of Speer's sedan. The lieutenant's blue-stubbled jaw was hard with resolution. The expression on Sillcott's sallow face was at once disgusted and superior.

Speer said, "Raven wants to turn this thing over to Sillcott, sir. The F.C.C. wants it, too. I wouldn't let anybody have it until you came."

"Where *is* Raven?" Catron asked.

Speer nodded toward the trees. "Him and Trichak are down there talking to the campers, sir."

Private Torchman was standing near a coupé that had smashed head-on into the trees. Both Vencel and Speer had seen Okie jacking out the crumpled right front fender of the car not long before. Vencel could not see anyone inside. Speer took two sheets of paper from a clipboard in the sedan. "Here's the report, sir."

The colonel folded the papers and put them into his shirt pocket. He glanced toward the coupé. "He was in that?"

Speer said, "Yes, sir. He still is. He'd loaded the radio in back and was getting away when Torchman and I cut loose."

"The other radio was a ruse," Sillcott said. "I told you, Catron, when it——"

"Who got him, Speer?" Catron did not look at Sillcott.

"Torchman, sir. He had a carbine. I had my .45. We were trying for his tires. I did hit the gas tank."

"My time is being wasted," Sillcott said. "I want to take that radio back to camp to examine it. If——"

"There's no antenna on it, Speer," Catron said. "Are you sure you got everything?"

"It's a new type of ground-wave set." Sillcott compressed his lips impatiently. "From the very start this entire affair has been mishandled, and now——"

"Take the set and be damned," Catron said. "It's a living operator I want."

It occurred to Vencel that the colonel would have condemned him for doing what Speer and Torchman had done: killed a radio operator instead of getting him alive. But then, the colonel had no reason to distrust Speer and the private, while Vencel's status had been uncertain.

Raven and Trichak came out of the trees when Sillcott was loading the transmitter into the back seat of a sedan. It was heavy and awkward to handle. At a nod from Catron, Lieutenant Speer went over to help the scientist. Raven kept looking at a notebook until he was close. He put it away then and said to Catron, "Technically, the F.C.C. has custody of that transmitter."

"Let them get it from Sillcott then," the colonel said. "I haven't time for technicalities."

Raven gave him a quietly speculative look and then he turned to Vencel. "Come with me, please."

The man crumpled sidewise on the seat of the coupé was the fat salesman Vencel had seen at Okie's place. "Can you identify him?" Raven asked.

"He said his name was Collins." Vencel told about the meeting at the café.

"His name *is* Collins." Raven seemed troubled, as if he could not find sense or pattern in his work. "There's not one item in his background to indicate subversive connections."

Catron peered into the coupé. "Background hell! That's the trouble with your outfit, Raven. You're trying to prove something by what a man did or was ten years ago. Outside of the men in the mountain, who don't count, you won't find one known foe in the whole operation."

"Oh?" Raven murmured.

"No! Collins and all the rest on the outside are picked men with no records. You won't find them in your files, Raven. Start from today. To hell with the research. This is war. The accomplishments of the men facing us are important today only. Who they associated with a decade ago means nothing."

"I'm afraid I'm old-fashioned then, Colonel," Raven said. "My business is to assemble evidence, not to follow theories."

"You've got a dead man there," Catron said. "Forget him. What we want is a live operator. Sure, in time you may prove his association with the enemy, but that'll be too late to do us any good on this job." Catron glanced at Blue Peak.

Just the squarish gray tip of the peak was visible, but that piece of lime and granite dominated everything, Vencel thought. The colonel was right.

Raven did not think so. "I have my way of doing things, Catron. I might remind you, also, that this part of the operation is mine, not yours."

It was the first time Vencel had ever heard irritation in Raven's voice.

"That's fine," Catron said. "Bader, the waiter at Okie's place, ran out last night. Who is he?"

"In time," Raven said, "I'll be able to answer that."

There was a crumpled newspaper lying near a garbage can that was chained to a block of concrete on which the can rested. The colonel grabbed the paper and spread it open. Vencel's eyes went immediately to the words "Drought . . . Disaster Facing Nation's Wheat and Cattle Areas."

"Time!" Catron said. He chewed the word like a dog worrying a bone. "There is no time, Raven." He thrust the newspaper at Raven, who regarded him quietly.

"I'm aware of your position, Colonel." Raven looked at Trichak and Speer, who were squatted at the back of the coupé, examining a bullet hole. "Anything more, Trichak, before we move the car?" It was a dismissal of Colonel Catron, an affirmation of Raven's methods of doing his own work.

On the way back to the lake the sentries who stopped the jeep twice sensed the colonel's savage mood. They were completely military. Vencel squirmed. The jolting was making his hip ache, his head was hurting, and the hot air rushing into his face did not make him feel any better.

When they went down the front ridge Vencel saw black mud showing around the inlet of the lake. From now on the water would go rapidly.

"Get some rest," Catron said. "I want you to go out on the lake with me this afternoon."

Sillcott's men were having an open-air session over the transmitter. It had been placed on a mess table. Sillcott's brown, bald head showed above all the others. Now and then he spoke curtly or made a point with the aid of his hand. The group looked like a bunch of doctors who had just discovered a wonderful new disease, Vencel thought wearily.

He went into his tent and knew at once why the scientists were dissecting the radio in the open air. He dragged a mattress from a cot and went up the hill until a sentry stopped him. He flopped the mattress on the ground and lay down.

The sentry was new army. "You can't sleep there," he said.

"Watch me," Vencel said. "And don't annoy me when they pipe down chow."

One half of the lake was in shadows when Lieutenant White woke Vencel up. "You got time for a cup of coffee and a sandwich before you go boating with the colonel and me."

Vencel sat up. The sharp edge of his headache was gone, but there was still a dull pain. His hip moved as if it had become cemented during his sleep. "I'm a hundred years old." He yawned and the back of his neck hurt. He felt it gingerly.

"You got a mild concussion," White said. "If you don't strain yourself, you may live another week or two."

"You got a mild sunburn."

"I've found the cure. You know that little bottle of oil in the elastic holder on your fishing jacket? It's the best dope I ever found. What is it?"

"With a little glass rod on the stopper?"

"Yeah." White nodded brightly.

"Dry fly oil." Vencel laughed.

They went toward the mess tent. Sillcott's men were sitting around the table in the open, drinking coffee. The radio had been reduced to small parts and the scientists were staring at the remains with pleasure.

"What's a ground-wave set?" Vencel asked.

"You drive two stakes in the ground, with a wire between them, as I get it. Your signal ripples through the ground or however radio waves travel. The stakes were solid silver. That's a nice touch."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE HUGE LOG AND PLANK RAFT was around the dog leg of the lake when Vencel went out with Catron and White in a rubber raft without an outboard. They rowed across to the side of the lake where the slide-rock fanned into the water.

"How many tunnels did Olson have?" Catron asked.

"Seven or eight."

"Can't you make up your mind?"

"The records you showed me said seven. They're more accurate than my memory, I'd say, so let's say seven."

"Let the boat drift, White," Catron said. They were close inshore, against a discolored ledge. "Now, Vencel, where would you say the first tunnel is, from the south?"

It was difficult to tell, for the portals were still under water, and Vencel's landmarks were fixed in his mind on the level of the natural lake. He kept studying the shore. He saw a stringer of red iron on the ledge and his memory began to function. He pointed. "Just about there."

White used one aluminum paddle. The raft bumped the ledge. By peering over the side into the still, black water, they could barely see the outlines of the tunnel.

"All right," Catron said. "The next one?"

Slowly, one by one, they spotted the portals of the tunnels, and by then they were close to the fan of slide-rock. There were seven tunnels.

"This side goes straight down?" Catron asked.

Vencel nodded.

"How deep?"

"I wouldn't know. Sounding in the middle never showed more than ninety feet, for the natural lake, that is."

Catron nodded. "We've got the tunnels spotted. Row over to the raft, White." Vencel took one of the paddles.

Major Arbaugh started to give the colonel a hand aboard the raft. "We'll just stay alongside," Catron said. He called to the men sitting over the well with headphones. "What's the depth south of the slide-rock, along the ledge?"

One of the sonar men took off his headphones. He said, "What?" and the colonel repeated the question. The second sonar man removed his headphones. The two men conferred. "It was fairly deep, as the lake goes," one of them said, "but we don't remember just how far. Mr. Sillcott has all the dope we've taken."

"Yes." Catron bit the word off. "Were there any unusual humps or formations along the bottom over there?"

The two men conferred once more. "We just take the figures and chart them. There might have been some wide differences in the soundings over there. Mr. Sillcott could tell you."

"Thanks," Catron said. He nodded toward the inlet.

When the boat was well away from the raft Vencel said, "You think there may be a waste pile at the bottom of the ledge—from driving one of the tunnels deeper?"

"There could be," Catron said. He went at once to Sillcott when they reached the shore.

Vencel saw the two men talking near the table strewn with parts of the transmitter. It appeared now that the electronic group was slowly assembling the radio. What Catron said was brief. His hands moved in quick gestures. The tall scientist looked down at him with a brooding expression, and then he shook his head. The colonel's hands moved again, and his head jerked as he bit off words.

Sillcott turned away. He spent several minutes talking rapidly to the men at the table, pointing with his finger at the transmitter parts. Then he faced Catron again and even across the distance his attitude implied that the colonel was a minor annoyance that would have to be accepted. From the set of Catron's head and shoulders and the way he stood on spraddled legs, Vencel knew that he must be fuming.

The two men started toward a tent together, and then Sillcott went back to the table for another moment, as if he had forgotten a point that could not wait. It seemed to Vencel that it was a stall to drive another barb into the colonel's impatience. Eventually the two men walked away together.

Raven and Trichak drove into camp when White and Vencel were on their way to chow. Raven motioned for Vencel to come over to the car.

"How long have you known the sheriff of this county, Vencel?"

"All my life."

"Is he a man who can keep his mouth shut?"

"Yes."

Raven nodded. "These deaths, you know, are properly the jurisdiction of the sheriff. Of course——" Raven hesitated. "Thanks for the opinion." He got out of the car and walked away briskly with Trichak.

The due processes of the law. Raven probably would accept no short cuts or compromise. Vencel admired the man for that integrity even in the face of disaster. Law was law and evidence must be gathered carefully, as Raven saw it. And there lay one of the unreconcilable differences between democracy and those who were threatening it.

Vencel could and did pay momentary homage to the point; but he knew that he himself, like Colonel Catron, would cut sharply across the line into any violence, lawful or otherwise, if it would help drag the men from Blue Peak. He would fight them on their own terms, serving pragmatics first and democratic theory second.

This was more vicious than a shooting war. Vencel thought that if he could command and control it, he would leave no men alive to run to the protection of the very system that was being attacked.

He went back to White, who had waited at the entrance to the mess tent.

"The Raven hath a worried look," White said. "I never thought I'd live to see the day."

"Too many bodies."

They got their food and carried the trays outside to eat.

White's momentary flippancy was gone. He sat on the drying grass with his tray on a stump before him. The tortured look of his long, blistered face was deeper than the sunburn. His pale eyes stared at Blue Peak as if he could see the enemies inside it. "You know something, we're losing."

"We'll get 'em," Vencel said. "At least we'll blow them up, if they don't do it first."

White shook his head. "No good. We've got to have the weather-wrecker in one piece, or we've lost again. Right now there are others ready to start somewhere else in the country the minute this one is gone. It could go on for years unless we get one. When men like Sillcott have one to study, it won't take long for them to work out a means of jamming it or whatever they have to do to ruin it by remote control."

Deliberately, White picked up his tray and threw the food away as if the sight of it offended him. "I'd like to feel rain against my face just once again, Vencel. I'd like to see a cloudy day." He pointed suddenly at Blue Peak. "If you knew where they were in there, if you were standing in the entrance, how could you get to them before they ruined everything?"

"I don't know. How can Sillcott and the meteorologists be so sure that business really is lousing the weather up?"

"Oh, hell! You should have been in Georgia, Vencel. They got only a two weeks' run down there, and in that time they had the pine trees crackling. The one in Illinois lasted ten days. Instead of the air being sultry, it was as dry as Arizona. We started to pry our way into the old coal mine where the weather-wrecker was. They blew it up. Two hours later it was raining old rubber boots and West Point lieutenants. Does it work? Have you ever seen a summer like this in the mountains?" White jerked a handful of grass from the ground and held it up.

Vencel ate his food slowly, watching White. After a time he decided the lieutenant was not a defeatist; he was tired and savage from the agony of his sunburn, and he was frustrated by the lack of progress and the tyranny of time that was ruining Colonel Catron.

"Did the colonel find out anything from Sillcott?" Vencel asked.

"Yes. The soundings show the slide-rock in the bottom of the lake. Out from the portals of the tunnels, at the foot of the ledge, there are minor humps, accounted for by the waste taken from the tunnels when they were driven. That's all."

That was a major setback, Vencel thought. Although he had discounted at first Catron's belief that one of Olson's tunnels held the answer to Blue Peak, he had gradually accepted the idea, perhaps more from hope than logic.

"What about the mines in Clover Basin?" Vencel asked.

White shook his head. "There are four tunnels in solid granite. We've been to the ends of them. There are three others that could have been used. All three are caved in. The moss and lichens and other growth around the portals are at least fifteen years old, the botanists say."

The more Vencel thought about the problem the more certain he was that thinking was a way to bring on a cold chill of defeat. He looked at Blue Peak. It was impassive, a tremendous wedge of stone ripping into the sky. And the sky above it was dirty. For the first time he realized that he had not noticed the discoloration from as far away as Okie Saunders's place.

He said, "At least it will be a pleasure to hear the devils blow themselves to bits."

"It won't to Colonel Catron," White said. He picked up his tray and took it over to slosh it in the G.I. can behind the mess tent.

CHAPTER NINE

THE STRAIN ON COLONEL CATRON'S FACE was not of lines or sagging flesh but rather an intentness in the expression of his eyes, in the tightness of his lips. The light fell on the gray streak in his hair and showed tiny red veins under the skin of his cheeks. He stood in the middle of the dampened floor of the headquarters tent with his hands clasped behind him.

He and Vencel were alone.

"Day after tomorrow," the colonel said, letting the words lay heavy, "Raven will send two hundred men—more if he can get them—into the mountains around Okie's place. He has the sheriffs of four counties making the arrangements now. Raven intends to put the radios out of business.

"The operators, Vencel. If the F.B.I. gets any of them they'll go to work on them. But how? Politely. I'll never get a whack at any of them. I'll be relieved long before polite methods turn up what I want. If I have that code, I think I can get the time limit rescinded on this job. Sillcott can use the radio Speer captured. With it and the code we can keep those men in the peak happy while I'm preparing to get my hands around their necks."

Vencel saw a literal picture of the colonel clutching his hands around someone's neck. The terrible coldness of Catron's eyes made it real.

The colonel went on, speaking slowly. "To assume that the man who got away last night was picked up by a car and moved to a new position between the road blocks is assuming timing that would have been perfect. We had cars patrolling the highway. The man is on foot, Vencel. He can't carry a transmitter as large as the one Speer took. He'll have to go to one.

"There have been signals sent from the canyon. You said before that there are small caves down there. I'm playing a strong hunch that the man last night went into the canyon, Vencel. I think the next signal will come from there, provided, of course, that Raven's search details don't get the man first."

"Any man hiding out down there is asking to be trapped," Vencel said.

'Where would *you* go?"

"Into the timber."

"You wouldn't leave any tracks?"

"I think not."

"Could dogs find you?"

"Yes."

"They couldn't if you waded into the river and stayed there."

"The water was down last night," Vencel said. "Right now it'll take more swimming than wading to get into Lime Creek Canyon." He did not like the thought. "Maybe the man went to Okie's place."

"He could have, but we know it wasn't either of the Saunderses. I want the canyon checked, Vencel."

"You think it might have been Bader?"

"Forget individuals, Vencel!" The colonel was irritated. "That's Raven's trouble. All I want is a radio operator. I don't care whether he has a face or a name. I want him before Raven's bush-beaters start thumping tubs in every thicket and scare all the birds to cover. I can't wait."

Vencel knew where the interview was headed. He saw the colonel weighing him as he might have looked at a company of men, balancing expendability against probable achievement.

"I can't spare White or Speer right now," Catron said, "but I'll give you as many men as you need."

"Did I volunteer?"

"I think you will. You have no status in this operation, of course. I *have* put in a requisition to hire you as a guide. It may never be approved." Catron paused. "You have a chance now to do something big, an opportunity that never comes to any individual in ordinary war, medals and citations to the contrary. Will you try it?"

"Yes."

"How many men do you want?"

"One. When do I start?"

"I want you in there at dawn. Go through the canyon.

You know it thoroughly, I'm convinced. There will be two-man patrols in unmarked sedans on the highway, with orders to give you help if requested."

If Vencel met an emergency in the canyon, patrols on the highway would be almost as remote as Marines in Japan. "Who will you send with me?"

"White will take care of that and the other details." Catron sat down at his desk. The report Speer had given him was still in his shirt pocket. Vencel wondered if he had ever looked at it.

"I want him alive, of course," the colonel said. "If you kill him you'll have a murder charge against you. I have no authority to give you orders. If you get him alive you may be commended—someday, if I'm not court-martialed for what I intend to do with the man. If he kills you, that's too bad. You don't like flag waving, Vencel, so I'm stating the case flatly."

Colonel Catron watched Vencel's reaction for a moment, and then he said brusquely, "Go on to bed and get some sleep. Good night."

The water at the dam had been running long enough now to have been blended into Vencel's mind along with the sounds of the camp, the feel of the dark lake and the silence of the mountains; but as he walked away from the headquarters tent, the water was all he could hear.

The sergeant's name was Leon Bowman. The sun had stained him the color of old coffee grounds. Climbing down into the canyon below the high bridge in the half light of false dawn, he moved with the lean strength of a hungry cat. Now it was dawn. He stood beside Vencel at the first booming pool below the cascades. He squinted down the slot of frothing water. His teeth were long and narrow. His neck was lean and corded.

White had picked him. He was, Vencel guessed, about as tough and seasoned as sergeants came. Bowman's .45

was slung in a waterproof bag. His machete hung from his shoulder on an elastic cord.

The machete was out of place. It was a heavy-backed tool, eighteen inches long, gray-sharp on the edge, suitable for brutal work. Looking at it, Vencel said, "We'll have to do plenty of swimming, Bowman."

"Yeah."

"Won't that machete give you trouble?"

"No." Bowman kept squinting down the canyon.

The sergeant was so sure of himself that it seemed to Vencel he might have been in places like this before. It was time to start, but Vencel kept staring at the machete. He wondered why Colonel Catron, who had not allowed him out of sight of White or Speer, had suddenly thrown him on his own resources during this assignment.

The reasons had been clear last night at the lake; but down here in the semigloom beside the boiling water there were disquieting intrusions.

"How long have you been with this outfit, Bowman?"

"Not too long."

"How long is that?"

"For a while." Bowman watched Vencel like a battle-seasoned noncom sizing up a new lieutenant.

"You know what we want down here?"

"Yeah, a man." Bowman added, "Alive."

He was clipped and hard and sure. He could be a sergeant, and he could be something else. White had picked him. White was Catron's nephew. Thinking would lead from one thing to another. The angry water was enough to worry about. Vencel looked at the machete and asked one more question.

"Were you with the detail on the Lucky Dog road?"

"Yeah."

Vencel nodded. He might as well talk to the rocks. "The first pothole is a quarter of a mile from here." He waded out. The contracting clamp of the water knocked his stomach flat and drove his breath high in his chest. When he tried to swim across, the current whisked him toward a boiling pool. He sped over a waterfall and went under. He kicked his feet against the bottom and shot up, shaking his head like a trout trying to throw a hook.

It would be worse later.

He struck out for a ledge that would save fifty feet of swimming. When he reached it, pulling himself up slowly, Bowman was beside him.

As far as Vencel knew no one had ever gone through Lime Creek Canyon when the gates were open at Grizzly Lake. He wished that Catron were standing on the ledge now, looking at the next stretch of wild water.

Bowman's machete clanked against the limestone. When Vencel looked around the sergeant was adjusting the weapon to hang higher on his hip.

They worked along the ledges when they could. They waded when they could, clinging to the rocks, stumbling and slipping under the powerful tug of the river. The booming voices of the water reduced their talk to signals. When there was no other way, they swam, fighting to keep their skulls from being smashed against rocks that sent spray high with an angry sound.

Blue-lipped, with aches that were yet under the anesthesia of cold, they were swept past the first pothole cave and came ashore on a mass of tumbled rock a hundred yards downstream. Vencel pointed up, and then he tapped his chest. Stiff with cold, with the sharp edges of the lime rock ripping his fingers, Vencel climbed up to the pothole.

It was the size of a small room. Rats had left sticks and bones on the floor, and there was a layer of dust a thousand years old. And in the dust were the footprints of a man.

Vencel went back to Bowman. He put his lips close to the sergeant's ear and told him about the cave. Bowman nodded. He adjusted his machete again.

At low water there were places where the river ran into dark crevices, coursing out again farther downstream. Even as a boy Vencel had never tried to explore any of those sepulchral holes. They were under water now, and he was glad of that. One by one he and Bowman looked into every cave that Vencel remembered. Someone had been ahead of them. There was no way of telling how long before, for marks in ancient dust that never feels the spoilage of wind or sun retain a fresh look for a long time.

They were wading belly deep when they passed the place where Vencel had dumped the jawlifter from his creel. He stared up at the walls. Something about the incident that day with Speer and White tried to come into sharp focus in Vencel's mind, but the slippery rocks and the pain in his hip swept the thought away.

In the narrowest part of the canyon, where the rocks had sloughed in massive chunks, the churning water made a hell's broth for a hundred yards. This was a place to detour, but that would burn up two hours.

Vencel lowered himself from a rock. He had a bad moment when his feet touched nothing and the greedy current almost tore him loose before he was ready to go. Bowman watched him stolidly, licking water from his lips. Vencel kicked away. He shot between two rocks, feeling the greasy, iron-hard scrape of one of them against his shoulder. Straight ahead the water was threshing high above a barrier.

He kicked against a rock to avoid smashing head-on into the mass in front of him. He missed the part that stood high above the river, but one knee struck submerged rock. The leg was worthless in an instant. The current twisted Vencel and smacked his head against another rock, and then he was like a crippled fish, turning over and over, struggling vainly to gain control of himself. The water made a whining in his ears when his head was under.

One hand caught the edge of a rock, and he clung to it, but the force of his body swinging around in the river began to break his grip. He was aware that Bowman shot past him, pounding his arms high above water. Vencel's fingernails tore on the rock. He was nearly helpless in the swift rush once more.

Just ahead was a stretch where the sharp edges of tumbled limestone were ripping the river into mist. To Vencel's right Bowman had made a ledge and was resting there on his hands and knees. Then Vencel's head was under water again as he tried to swim toward the ledge. He came up for a gasping breath and saw that he would not make it. He would be swept downstream.

Bowman had the machete in his right hand then. He reversed it, clamping his hands on the thick back, thrusting the wooden handle out. Vencel caught the handle. For a moment all he could see was the white glare of water at eye level and Bowman's lean brown hands on the machete. Then slowly Bowman, flat now on the ledge, drew Vencel in.

Vencel lay on his belly, too spent to move. Water from his clothes gathered in the rough cups of the ledge. When he could sit up, he saw that Bowman was trailing one hand in the water and blood was sweeping away from it. He knew then: at the last moment, when Bowman's grip was slipping, he had clutched his fingers around the sharp edge of the machete.

After a while the sergeant took his hand from the river. The bleeding was almost stopped and the lips of the cuts on all his fingers were tight; but when he flexed his hand gently the blood welled up. "How many more caves?"

"Five or six, close to the river this time."

Bowman stood up. As they worked around the tumultuous water, keeping to the ledge and the masses of fallen rock, the sergeant left splashes of blood behind him.

There was one more bad swim, over a waterfall where the stream made a gleaming curve that ended in a pool of swirling savagery. Vencel went over first. He felt a murderous tugging from his waist down as the whirlpool tried to suck him in, then it relented and shot him toward the shore.

Bowman came down the waterfall feet first. He went under and came up and tried to swim. The whirlpool hauled him back and when he came up again he was floating loosely, face down. The spinning water took him under once more as Vencel was wading and swimming toward him. For a while after the gurgling vortex of the whirlpool leveled out there was nothing but smoothness, and Bowman was gone.

The whirlpool ran again and spewed him up. Vencel lunged ahead and caught the sergeant by one leg and struggled back to shore. Above Bowman's temple, there was a small cut. The flesh around it was swelling. Vencel knelt in front of him and began to pump his lungs, and with every move he cursed the fact that Colonel Catron had ever spawned a brainstorm about this canyon.

There was scarcely any water in Bowman; he had been knocked out by the bump on his head. After a time he began to breathe gustily, then he lay blinking vaguely at the canyon rim high above. He was, Vencel guessed, done for the day.

Vencel was wrong. Bowman sat up, resting his head on his knees. He said, "I'm ready." His hand was bleeding badly now.

"You're ready to go back to the highway." Vencel looked up to find a place to scale the walls. It was then he saw the man standing there in bright sunlight on the canyon rim, looking down at them. Vencel leaped up.

"Maybe that's our meat." Bowman made no move. He merely stared at the motionless figure.

Unhurriedly the man moved away. He was on the south rim of the canyon, with the black timber at his back. Bowman looked at Vencel, who shook his head. "He was about seven hundred feet away. When we get up there, if we started now, he could be four miles away."

Bowman staggered to his feet. "Where now?"

"The last of the caves." The easy way out of the canyon lay below them. Bowman could go back to the highway then, and Vencel would have a try at the man who had shown himself on the rim.

The way to the remaining caves was relatively easy, but before Vencel looked into the last empty pothole, he knew Bowman was weakening. The man's hand had bled steadily. Under the dark coloring of his face the skin was splotchy gray. Guts would take anyone so far, and then there was a limit.

Vencel pointed out the way up the north side of the canyon. "Don't try to rush. When you find a patrol, tell them I'll come out somewhere above the high bridge sometime this afternoon."

Bowman said, "That guy was awful sure of himself, like he wanted to be shadowed." He watched Vencel quietly. He did not try to follow when Vencel started up the south wall of the canyon. Vencel had half expected that he would.

Later, from the south rim, Vencel saw Bowman climbing slowly on the other side. The machete was still dangling against his hip.

Knowing where the man had stood upon the rim, Vencel lost little time finding where he had walked away, headed toward the timber. He hesitated then. Tracking through the dry forest would be slow and uncertain, and perhaps more dangerous than going through the canyon.

By the time he had established the general direction of the man's going, Vencel was more uneasy. The fellow had left marks that he need not have left. He was either inept in the woods or playing an obvious game. Vencel swung away from the trail in a semicircle and then worked back to it.

It was not long afterward that a cool voice said, "That will do. Stop there and get rid of the .45, friend."

Friend. It had a hellish twist. The man was lying under the full, low skirts of a clump of spruce trees, but his hand and arm and the pistol were in plain sight. Vencel disarmed himself.

"Kick it away," the voice ordered.

Vencel kicked the service automatic into a bush. The man came out of the clump of trees. It was Bader. He was tense and wary, but now he held the pistol at his side as if he had no further use for it. He was wearing a bird hunter's light shoes, a pale green woolen jacket and a gray woolen shirt. In all respects his clothing fitted him.

"What did you find in the canyon?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"I could have told you that."

"When did you go through it?" Vencel asked.

"Yesterday. You guys are running in circles, aren't you?"

"What guys?"

Bader shrugged. "Hell's fire! What's all the secrecy getting you? You haven't found it yet, have you?"

"Found what?"

"The radio, Sherlock. Play that cloak and dagger routine with someone who's impressed, not me. You guys are all alike. You signal every punch and you get nowhere."

"Who are you?" Vencel asked. "I know about you draining your oil to wreck your car so you——"

"So does the little fatso with the high forehead," Bader said. "That's why I left Okie's. Your pal was getting too curious about me."

It took Vencel some time before he realized that Bader must mean Raven. "You wanted someone to follow you, didn't you, Bader?"

"Sure." Bader's dished face was insolent. "I want to know where Okie went night before last. I assume you guys *did* know he was away for a while about the time you were rushing men up that old road near the high bridge."

Bader had been around a little himself. Vencel said, "He went after a wrecked car."

"I know he brought one back, but what else did he do while he was gone? Or would you characters know?" Bader's contempt was hard to take.

"A patrolman came after him and was with him all the time." Vencel was not sure of his statement.

"That lets Okie out then. I figured him for a two-bit character from the start, but you've got to admit his tourist trap is the natural pivot post."

"For what?"

"Brother, you play it coy, don't you? For the radio."

"How do you know there's a radio, Bader?"

"I know it and that's enough."

"No it isn't," Vencel said.

"It will have to do for you and all your fumbling pals, bub."

While they were staring at each other a heavy blast sounded in the direction of Blue Peak. The concussion rolled across the hot mountains like the pall of doom. Vencel's breath caught in his chest. The men in Blue Peak had slammed the plunger.

"All right, somebody is snooping around your explosion tests," Bader said. "They've got a radio you want. I want the man who's operating it a hell of a lot more than you ever will."

Explosion tests. Sure. Catron must be faking up there. Vencel took hope again. His breath came normally once more. Deep behind Bader's eyes he sensed a deadly bitterness.

"Where was Mrs. Saunders last night?" Vencel asked.

Bader's grimace was a gesture of annoyance. "When I left, she and Okie were going to bed. Mrs. Saunders! No wonder you guys are milling around in circles."

"What time did you leave?"

"About eleven."

"Did you leave a light in the trailer?"

"No. I took my plunder and lit out." Bader shook his head. "You're wasting time on the tourist joint. I've been through everything over there but the Saunderses' bedroom and the gasoline storage tanks." He started backing away.

"If you're on the right side, Bader, you'd better come in with me."

Bader laughed. "And get a slap on the wrist from some Federal stooge, huh?"

"You may get worse prowling around on your own. You don't know what you're into, Bader."

"I know all I need to know." Bader backed out of sight in the spruce trees. "Take your gun and scram, Sherlock."

While Vencel was stooping to retrieve the .45 he heard Bader change position. Vencel hesitated, with the gun in his hand. From the cover of the trees Bader said, "Go on."

Through the hot stillness Vencel tramped back to the canyon rim. The knee he had jammed on the rock was aching dully, and his hip was a wild mass of pain. He was going to have a fine time explaining to Colonel Catron why he thought Bader was on the right side, if somewhat confused. It would have been suicide to have tried to take Bader, either alive or dead.

That too would be difficult to explain to the colonel.

Vencel went along the canyon rim to the highway above the bridge. Fifteen minutes later a cruising sedan picked him up. Sergeant Bowman was slumped in the back seat, his hand bandaged. He asked no questions.

"Go to the top of the pass," Vencel told the driver.

In the wide, timbered saddle where the highway tipped over the divide there were two large state highway maintenance buildings, log rest rooms, a stone marker and twenty or thirty tourists taking pictures of each other. One earnest individual in lavender shorts and a black beret was fussing around a camera on a tripod.

The camera was pointed toward Blue Peak, which was not unusual, since the peak dominated the entire stretch of range north of Columbus Pass; but Rudy Trichak, in a T shirt and rumpled slacks, was watching the photographer closely.

The highway buildings were undoubtedly loaded for bear, Vencel thought. He walked over to one of two state patrol cars, wherein a lieutenant was eating lunch from a bucket. When that happened to state highway patrol lieutenants things were really tough.

"There was a freckle-faced sergeant who escorted a wrecked——"

"Gardner," the lieutenant said. He glanced at the sedan Vencel had left. He pointed at the other patrol car. "When are you fellows going to quit looking for stolen tarps or shovels—or whatever you're looking for?"

"Ask the colonel."

Sergeant Gardner, also eating his lunch, said, "Yep, I went after Okie, trailed him to the wreck, hooked the cable for him and trailed him back."

"When you woke him up, you're sure you heard Mrs. Saunders talking?"

"He asked her questions. She was beefing about him getting up in the middle of the night."

"Can you swear you heard her talking, not just Okie?"

Gardner was puzzled. "Would he be talking to himself?"

"Can you swear you heard Mrs. Saunders talking?"

"Look, mister, when you start getting legal, I can't swear I even heard Okie. They were upstairs in that crow's-nest and I was on the ground. Somebody did some talking and pretty soon Okie came down buckling his belt and grumbling about women always wanting to sleep."

"Thanks." When Vencel rode away in the sedan Trichak and the photographer in lavender shorts were having an apparently pleasant conversation.

Although all evidence was against the idea in Vencel's mind, he could not forget the cleaver on the butcher block or the heavy, tired movements of Mrs. Saunders the last time he had been in her kitchen. "Back to the lake."

He kept looking at the machete on the floor of the sedan. When he and Bowman changed to a jeep at the three-gear pool, the sergeant tossed the machete into the back seat. He drove with his bandaged hand seeping blood. He said nothing all the way to the lake.

When the sentry on the front ridge stopped the jeep, Vencel asked, "Where was the blast?"

"Up there—high." The sentry pointed at Blue Peak.

Bowman stopped at the motor pool. "It scared me, too," he said. He got out and walked toward the surgeon's tent.

He was no army sergeant, Vencel thought. He wondered if White knew who he was. He wondered if anyone knew what he was doing on this hassle, excepting Colonel Catron. And then he began to doubt Catron, too.

The colonel was away, a sentry at the headquarters tent said. He would be back when he returned. Speer and White were gone also. Vencel went to the mess tent for sandwiches and coffee. The sergeant in charge seemed to have grown used to running a short-order establishment. He growled a little but was agreeable.

Vencel munched his sandwiches on the baking hillside. The weather men were busy at their tables, meticulously doing chores and making notes which might be a great help in the future, but Vencel was struck with the futileness of their tasks at the moment. The raft was still out of sight around the dog-leg. One rubber boat was motionless at the landing near the inlet. The private in charge there was lying on the shore with his hat over his eyes.

From one of the tents occupied by the electronics men, Sillcott was lecturing in a precise voice. Occasionally there were murmurs of other voices. Someone at the motor pool was singing, but he interrupted himself to curse as a wrench slipped.

The dirty mists lay above Blue Peak. Somewhere high on the slide rock Vencel heard a dry clatter of stone and saw tiny figures moving slowly. The arching tops of Olson's tunnels were barely visible above the glassy surface of the lake.

Vencel walked down to the lake. Someone had marked the recession of the water with sticks in the mud. The resting private looked from under his hat with one eye and decided Vencel was not worth the effort of rising.

Vencel was standing there trying to remember things he must have forgotten about Olson's tunnels, when Sillcott came down the hill and said curtly to the soldier, "I'm going out to the raft."

The private got up, yawning.

"May I ask you something, Mr. Sillcott?" Vencel walked down the shore, and after hesitating Sillcott followed.

"I'm busy," he said.

"Is it possible to cause an explosion by remote control?" Vencel asked. "I mean"—he looked at the peak—"if the factors were all prearranged."

"Yes," Sillcott said. The word ran into a precise hiss. He walked back to the rubber boat and waited for the private to beach the bow. When he was being rowed away he turned his sallow face and jutting nose toward Vencel and gave him a long speculative look.

They could lose their guts in that hole, Vencel thought. No matter how fanatical, they could lose their nerve when the showdown came. . . .

Arrangements might have been made long ago. Miles from Blue Peak someone could twist a dial and pulverize everything in the chamber of the mountain.

Those who are likely to falter are marked well in advance. . . .

Once more Vencel took a mattress and sacked out on the hill, telling a perimeter guard to wake him when Colonel Catron returned. It was dusk when a guard other than the one Vencel had talked to roused him. The heat was still in the air. Each day it seemed to be growing more intense, Vencel thought.

"The colonel just came from chow," the sentry said. "Did anyone ever tell you about your snoring?"

Vencel had to wait before the headquarters tent. Sillcott was inside. The colonel's voice ran low and smooth. Sillcott said, "Unlikely. But if it were so, the debris would have been distributed widely in the lake, not in a compact mass." His tone carried contempt, or perhaps it might have been impatience with everything not in the cold, clear realm of science.

He came out a few minutes later. Lieutenant White glanced through the doorway and nodded for Vencel to come in. Both Catron and White looked all in. The colonel's shirt was torn, his face was drawn and he needed a shave. It was the first time Vencel had seen beard stubble on his face. It was gray. White's face was fiery torment. Blisters had broken and left purple edges of burned flesh. His features were smeared with grease.

Catron said, "Sillcott thinks it would have been impossible for them to drive one of Olson's tunnels deep into the peak without attracting attention. What about it, Vencel?"

"I think so too."

The colonel stared at him moodily. "I spent the whole blessed day on Blue Peak. We've pried at every rat hole up there big enough to conceal your hat. It's here, right here at the lake. This is the only place there can be an entrance, and this is where Olson was killed."

For once Vencel did not know whether Catron was being stubborn or determined.

"What did you discover in the canyon, Vencel?"

"Nothing." Vencel told him about the empty potholes. He hesitated and then he told the colonel about Bader.

Catron and Lieutenant White exchanged glances. "He outmaneuvered you," the colonel said.

"I know it. He'll do it anytime one or two men go after him. Bader is on our side, Colonel."

A pink flush ran over Catron's face. Tiny veins showed in his cheeks. "I'll judge that myself. He knew there was a radio, Vencel." That was a damning fact that made failure of Vencel's mission. "Tomorrow Raven's game-beaters will be turned loose."

"What will they be looking for?" Vencel asked. "I thought the brass wanted no undue attention centered on this area."

"You thought right," Catron said. "They'll be looking for an escaped convict. It's all arranged."

Mass deceptions. Stalls. Perhaps Bader was right, Vencel thought. Unco-ordinated efforts dissipated in all directions must have the enemy laughing to themselves.

Vencel said, "The radio that decoyed from near the Lucky Dog—did they find it yet?"

"No," Catron said. "I think it was carried away by the same man who took a slice at you."

"You said he might have gone into the canyon or to Okie's place temporarily. Maybe it's still at Okie's place."

"That camp has been searched," Catron said wearily. "The Saunderses' background has been checked again and again. They've been watched. Raven had a state sanitation inspector look into the septic tank. It was full of just what you'd expect. Their living quarters have been searched."

"And still it's the obvious place for contacts," Vencel said. He told about his conversation with the highway patrol sergeant that afternoon. "There's still a chance that Mrs. Saunders was in on the Sharpe's Ridge deal."

Catron leaned on his desk and pinched the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. He rubbed his eyes slowly, and then suddenly he was staring coldly at Vencel. "You'd like to search the place yourself tonight, eh?"

"Yes."

"What part in particular?"

"The garage. If we turn up a radio, it'll be a quick jump to the operator, and maybe to the code you want."

"Maybe," the colonel said. "Who do you want with you?"

"Bowman or Speer or White."

"I've got work for Speer and White," Catron said.

"And Bowman's gone somewhere," White said. "He left just before dusk."

"Somewhere?" Vencel looked at Catron. "He's in your outfit, isn't he?"

"Nominally," Catron said crisply. "How do you intend to approach the tourist camp?"

"I'll go along the north rim of the canyon after dark and come in from the back." Remembering Bader's words, Vencel was again near disgust because of the time-wasting, circumspect methods the army and all the other agencies involved were using. "If the highway were closed for security reasons, if Okie and his wife were picked up on suspicion, and a clamp put on the whole region, with martial law——"

White said quietly, "Are you confusing us with the other side?"

"When you're being ruined, fight any way you can," Vencel said hotly. "You don't scrap Marquis of Queensberry against a snake who knees you in the groin. To the devil with civil rights at a time like this."

Colonel Catron nodded intently.

"The test of our system is at a time like this," White said. "If we can't win without violating everything we pay lip service to then we'd better give up."

The truth of White's words was clear to Vencel; but there was Blue Peak, and dwindling time. Expediency was most attractive now.

For a moment it seemed that Catron would have liked to prolong the talk. He stared at Vencel and White, and then he said, "Send Speer to me, White." Vencel was dismissed.

CHAPTER TEN

CLEMENT RAVEN SAT BEFORE THE ALTAR of evidence, and the altar was growing more expressive all the time; but the heavy ticks of time were on Raven. Urgency was driving him. Expediency was threatening him. He knew he could not change his ways, and for an instant the knowledge was a troubling lump.

The gasoline lantern hissed light down on him, revealing a looseness of facial skin that had not been a week before. Among other things, there was a pair of shoes on the desk before him. He picked up the right shoe. While Rudy Trichak watched, Raven touched a round mark in the heel with a pencil, and then a worn spot near the tip of the sole. Carefully he fitted the shoe into a plaster cast on the desk.

"It seems to fit," he said. "Harper's?"

"His size. He left his suitcase in the trailer. The shoes might have been there."

"Everything is *might.*" Raven put the shoe down. "How far from the tourist camp did you find them?"

"Approximately two hundred yards. They had been shoved into the bushes. There's a tack up in the left shoe. Anyone who wore that shoe would have a mark, I'm sure."

"Did Harper?" Raven asked.

"I don't know."

"Send them to the laboratory. Have the minerals along the welt checked with the samples Walters picked up on Sharpe's Ridge. Have Forrest and Kelly finished searching the downhill side of the road above the three-gear pool?"

"Just about."

"On your way down tell them to shift uphill when they do finish." I've got all the men I need, Raven thought. I'm working them day and night, and still I can't catch up.

He relaxed for a moment after Trichak went out with the shoes, and then he went back to two statements taken on the day of Harper's death. One was that of Robert O. Radetsky, a sergeant at the three-gear pool. Clipped to it was a sheet of Raven's notes.

The other was the statement of John Masters Martin, who had been standing sentry duty on the front ridge. A man who had only a short time to go before being relieved at his post would be more cognizant of the time, Raven thought, than one who knew he would be in the same place for the next twenty-four hours. Martin's estimate of the time Harper was killed was very close to Vencel's estimate.

Sergeant Radetsky was completely out of line with his guess. Raven unlocked a desk drawer and looked once more at a transcript of Radetsky's records. As a security risk he was clean. His army record was excellent. He had had trouble with his father-in-law in Detroit four years before; and that was being investigated at the moment.

In the course of an hour Raven examined the background records of a dozen men now close to Blue Peak. There was Platt Vencel. Raven put the papers on him aside no sooner than any of the rest.

There was Major E. T. Bowman, G-2, now serving as a sergeant with Catron's engineers. Lieutenant Montgomery Crandall Speer, place of birth, Harlan, Kentucky. His father had been killed during a mining strike. The lieutenant's records showed a long string of dance-hall and roadhouse fights before he joined the army at seventeen. No known subversive record.

John Zenda Sillcott, age 55. Twenty-five years of his life had been spent in or near universities and research centers. He had wrecked two automobiles. He had forty-four known traffic violations in his background. He had been married for twelve years and was the father of twin girls aged seven. No known subversive record.

John Catron White's interests had run to things mechanical. He had owned a model airplane shop when he was sixteen. His mother was Catron's only sister. White had been graduated from West Point the year after the war ended. He had served three years in Germany. No known subversive activity.

Those . . . and many others. Raven stared at the streaked canvas walls. Then he picked up pictures of Okie Saunders's garage. The curled edges of the slab bark were so clear Raven felt an urge to break them with his fingers. He pored over several pictures of signs that leaned against the outside wall, facing west.

Some of the data would be dropped into files, never to be seen again. Other parts of it, perhaps years from now, might form strangling threads of evidence after patient work filled all the gaps. Raven put all of it aside.

For a short time he reduced Operation Blue Peak to his part in it, setting aside that part of the problem that was strictly Colonel Catron's.

But time hammered him with its water drops, beating into his consciousness the fact that his work must lead to the same end as Catron's. Even if they won and got into Blue Peak by some miracle that Raven did not believe possible, there would be no rest. Other weather-wreckers were waiting somewhere else and other shadowy figures.

I'm tired, Raven thought; I'm tired and resentful of my own slow actions. If we get this one intact the men of science will strip its secret quickly and learn to nullify the others with power from a field I do not understand; and then there will be a chance to rest before the next assault. And in the end we'll win in all areas of operation.

It might be disaster if Colonel Catron were pulled off the job before he had a chance.

The telephone spilled noise all over the tent.

"Radio One, Mr. Raven. Code message for you. Shall we send it over, or will Mr. Trichak get it?"

"Send it over."

It was a simple message regarding the identification of fingerprints on a water glass that had been flown to Washington after Raven slipped it into his pocket at Okie's café shortly after a man named Bader had handled it.

When he had the message, Clement Raven swore softly.

Minutes later the phone rang again and a message from Special Agent David Forrest, now at the three-gear pool, brought Raven from his chair, gray-faced.

You made one step and then you slipped back two. As he started down the mountain in a jeep Raven almost forgot the terror that the road held for him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHEN VENCEL STARTED DOWN THE HILL alone there was a jeep close ahead of him. His lights shone on the great bald vulture head of John Z. Sillcott, who soon demonstrated that he was one of the poorest drivers in the world. On the straight runs of road the scientist dawdled. He speeded up on the curves. His brakes were smoking before he reached the three-gear pool.

The Lord—and other drivers—must devote a great deal of time to preserving J. Z. Sillcott, Vencel thought.

Sillcott left his jeep in the middle of the parking area. There were lights strung on the trees beyond the row of sedans. Sergeant Radetsky came from the machine shop and walked over to Sillcott.

"The same sedan, sir?"

"Yes. With the conventional shift. Will you back it out at once? I'm in a hurry."

The sedans were jammed close together. Radetsky eased between two of them, opened a door and squeezed inside. Vencel was getting out of his jeep when it happened.

The hood of the sedan rose like a rag whirled into the wind. The car went to its knees and bucked back. The rear window turned orange and a blast knocked out lights on the trees.

Smoke was still rolling from the sedan when Vencel reached it. The explosion had torn the front seat loose and thrown it against the back seat. Radetsky was a bloody bundle.

Men ran from the tents. Vencel backed out a car beside the wreck, and then there was room to move Radetsky. He was dead. Shortly afterward two of Raven's men came pounding from the trees and took charge. One of them called Raven at once.

For a long time Sillcott did not move from where he stood near his jeep. And then he walked slowly past the dead man and peered at the wrecked sedan. He sniffed. "T.N.T.," he said. "Incredible."

He was the calmest man present.

One of Raven's men asked, "Do you generally back out the sedan you're assigned, Mr. Sillcott?"

"When they're not crowded, yes."

A worried captain kept staring at the body. "We've been checking those engines two or three times a day, just for something like that."

"Whose orders?" the F.B.I. man asked quickly.

"Colonel Catron's—ever since that guy was shot up on the road." The captain started away. "I'll call him."

"That bomb must have been meant for you, Sillcott," Vencel said.

Sillcott gave him a brief, untroubled glance. "Obviously." He attempted to check out another sedan and leave, but the F.B.I. men told him to wait.

"I have urgent business in Midway," Sillcott said.

"We all have urgent business," one of Raven's men replied. "Please wait right here."

The captain returned from calling Catron. "I can't understand it. We checked those engines regularly."

"Who did the checking?" Vencel asked.

"Radetsky."

The F.B.I. agents were hovering over the engine of the bombed sedan. One of them asked, "Who was the last man out of here tonight, the last one to take a sedan?"

"Trichak." The captain looked at a card on a shelf desk nailed to a tree. He said the name again.

Radetsky. Trichak. What names to be involved in this operation, Vencel thought. It occurred to him then that his own name had a foreign tang. But there was nothing in a name. He glanced at Radetsky. If Harper had not happened by Vencel's car one day, Vencel would have been a sodden form like Radetsky. He looked at his own sedan, still parked where it had been since the day he left it here.

He wondered how long it would be before he could get into a car and touch the starter button without thinking.

Raven arrived just ahead of Colonel Catron and Lieutenant Speer. "Who used that sedan last, Captain?" the colonel asked.

The captain referred to the record sheet. "Mr. Sillcott, sir, this morning."

Raven talked briefly to his two men, and then he began to ask questions of witnesses, speaking in a soft voice, making notes, watching expressions casually. After several minutes he told Sillcott and Vencel they need not be delayed any longer.

A patrol sedan had come in off the highway for its two-hour check-in. Lieutenant Speer walked with Vencel when the latter started to leave. Speer's dark face was stony, his eyes Indian opaque. "I'd known Radetsky a long time," he said. "We enlisted on the same day in Chicago. That was a devil of a way for him to go."

Vencel got into the patrol sedan.

"You won't be alone down there tonight," Speer said, "but watch yourself every second. I've got the same hunch you have about that place. So has Catron, I'm sure."

The café went dark at eleven o'clock. A little later Okie turned off the lights at the pumps. All the cabins were rented, Vencel knew by the cars parked beside them. From the blackness of the trees behind the garage he listened to Okie coming from the pumps. Mrs. Saunders came out of the back door of the café. She slammed it and then she tried the lock.

She met her husband at the foot of the steps that led to their living quarters. She complained to him because there was no outside light, and Okie said, "Holy cow, the light bill is ruining us as it is. If you had your way you'd have lights strung everywhere."

They went up the stairs. The steps did not creak or rattle. A moment later light spilled toward the highway and then dimmed as the Saunderses pulled shades down. Five minutes later the lights were out.

All normal, all quiet, Vencel thought. At the moment only the fact that he was lying tensely in the darkness gave substance to his hunch. While he waited he tried to bolster his suspicions. The night the radio signaled from the Lucky Dog the café had closed at twelve, according to Mrs. Saunders, and she said there had been a light in the trailer then.

Bader said he had left an hour earlier than that.

A statement about time was of no importance unless a deliberate lie was involved. Because it supported his hunch, Vencel chose to believe that Bader had told the truth, which added one hour to the time Mrs. Saunders could have been absent from the camp.

Cars flashed up and down the highway. After a while someone above the café began to snore heavily. Vencel waited another half hour, watching traffic whisk by, listening to the rumbling of water in the canyon.

The back of the garage sat on three feet of fill. Vencel dug slowly with his hands. After he got through the baked crust of soil the going was easier. He found the leaves of a broken spring, baling wire, tin cans and other trash. Each car approaching on the highway was a threat, and then after it had gone, the engine making a lonely departing sound, Vencel wished another would sweep by to give him some brief contact with the normal world.

After an hour the dirt was falling away from the sill of the structure. Vencel reached inside. The smell of ancient oil crusted on the garage floor was strong. He pulled part of a greasy carton out of his way and then the warm, yielding folds of a blown-out truck tire. Gradually he enlarged the hole. When he tried to worm through it on his side his .45 was in the way. He removed the gun and left it on the banked dirt.

He wriggled through the hole and promptly spilled a misshapen bucket of crankcase oil from his chin to his knees. The shop was a mess. He wished he had a pencil flashlight. Little by little he learned his way around. He took fuel pumps from a tub until he knew there was nothing but more of them below. He searched a potbellied heating stove that was stuffed with old paper and trash. He took a long screwdriver from Okie's toolbox and probed the floor. For a while a quick-charger for batteries gave him a start, until he realized what it was; but even then he risked lighting a match to be sure.

After an hour and a half he knew his hunch about the garage was no good. If there had been a small transmitter around the place, it could have been moved by any of the cars that stopped here. He stood at the doors, looking through the cracks where they met.

Lights of cars whining past ran out on the white gravel of the parking space, catching dimly on the front of the café, made stark rectangles of the two red pumps.

There must have been a lot of heat on that morning after the fiasco on Sharpe's Ridge. Raven was shrewd and skillful. There were others too that Vencel did not know about. Any vehicle that stopped here must have been tagged and searched under the guise of an inspection by the state highway patrol. Still, there had been plenty of time to move the radio after that—if it had ever been here.

For a long time Vencel stood at the doors, asking himself where he could hide something about the size of a portable typewriter case. The cars kept rushing past. For once he could not identify any of the patrol sedans belonging to the army.

It was another hunch that sent him groping to the tool kit again. He found a screwdriver and an oil can. He scrabbled his way outside again and crouched at the corner of the garage, taking off his shoes. When the highway was black and no engine sounded close, he crossed the parking area to the pumps. Even without shoes his feet made small crunching sounds in the gravel.

If the pump housings were like others he had seen, both faces were hinged to give access to the units inside, and the doors could be opened by twisting slotted studs. He groped until he found the line of studs along one edge. The spring of the oil can squeaked when he pressed the trigger. In the quiet night it seemed to Vencel that the sound must have been heard for miles.

He guided the screwdriver into the first slot with his forefinger. The lug turned with a complaining, rusty sound. An instant later he had to run behind the garage when headlights bloomed suddenly on the curve near the high bridge.

This was foolishness. Okie had a right to cut loose at him from the long window above the café. Okie could kill him as a prowler, which was exactly what he was. He had no authority or right here, only Catron's connivance and that could be denied if things went sour.

The longer Vencel crouched behind the garage the more he doubted the sanity of the project, and he wondered why Catron had approved so readily. In the hot, tense night doubts came easily.

He went back to the pumps. Another turning lug scraped harshly. The hinges grated when he opened the door. Vencel strained toward the dark window above the café. He remembered how sensitive Okie was about anyone stopping at night when the place was closed. The highway patrolmen who had need of him at night usually flashed a spotlight on his windows and kept their headlights on to show the star on the sedan before getting out.

Vencel was sweating when he felt inside the housing. Near the top was the meter, filling almost all the pump head. Below was an air tank, a small electric motor and the pump that raised gasoline from the buried tank.

"Hell!" he breathed. He was not positive, but he thought he remembered that he had seen Okie deliver gas to cars from both pumps. In that case the second housing would contain the same machinery as the first.

The bellowing of truck engines sent him back to cover behind the garage. When the lights of the first truck splayed out to touch the pumps Vencel saw the cover standing open as he had left it. The truck drivers did not glance aside as they passed.

After a time Vencel steeled himself to go back. He knew it was mainly stubbornness that sent him. He opened the side plate of the second housing. There was no meter where there should have been one. He felt flexible connections and slip-joint connections, and then his hand came down on a case that was sitting on the boards level with the concrete base of the housings.

Without proof he knew he had found a transmitter.

His first impulse was to grab the radio and run up the highway with it until he met one of Catron's patrols. He clutched the handle and then he let go. The evidence belonged where it was, where Raven could make the most of it. Catron wanted an operator, and Lieutenant Speer had said that Vencel would not be alone down here tonight, so Catron must have someone close.

Vencel shut both doors. He was nervous then. The squeaky catches grated. He fastened only two on each door and then he went back to cover. Now it was time for Catron to show up. The rest was his.

Time passed and not one patrol sedan went past. Vencel put his shoes on. He kept watching the sky. It was growing late. There would be light and then anyone even glancing from the Saunderses' living quarters would see him. He did not want to leave the pumps out of his sight for a moment. Where in hell was Catron? Or had Speer known what he was talking about?

When the first gray light came he was in the trailer, watching from the curved window that faced the highway. He did not like the position. He liked it even less when he remembered that he had left the .45 near the garage. He had hoped that this night's work would be closed out quickly after he found the transmitter; but no sign had come. The trees across the road were motionless.

It was then that one of the army sedans went past. The two men in it did not even glance toward the café. Vencel had started to leave the trailer, but the car was gone. He went back to the window.

The trailer tilted as heavy weight fell on the floor. Vencel whirled from the window, standing in the narrow passage by the bunk.

Mrs. Saunders filled the other end of the trailer. Her hair was pulled back hard and tied in a knot. She was wearing house slippers and a butcher's apron.

"Why, Vencel! What are you doing here? And you're all over oil!"

She walked toward Vencel slowly, smiling. Her eyes were slaty. She was breathing sharply. Vencel saw perspiration on the discolored hairs on her upper lip. Her right hand was under the apron.

"Stay back," Vencel said. He braced himself against the end of the trailer.

She came on slowly. Her right hand slipped from under the white apron. She was holding a cleaver, low, with the edge toward Vencel. "Go ahead, Vencel. Jump at me."

". . . an up-swinging weapon . . . sharp and heavy . . . chopped from his chin to his brain . . ." Vencel knew how the F.C.C. man named Silvers had died.

Mrs. Saunders feinted with the cleaver. It did not move six inches from her knee. Vencel raised his foot.

"It won't do you any good," she said.

There came the pound of running footsteps outside. Someone shouted. Mrs. Saunders swung the cleaver all the way back. The trailer jolted hard and tilted. Lieutenant White came through the doorway. He skidded on the linoleum and even as he fell to his knees, the .45 in his hand bellowed.

Mrs. Saunders grunted and lurched forward. Vencel grabbed her hard. For an instant he thought she was fighting back savagely and then he realized it was only the great inert weight that he was struggling with.

White aimed the .45. Lieutenant Speer's voice was a sharp bark. "Don't kill her, you fool!" He came leaping inside and collided with White.

Mrs. Saunders sagged through Vencel's arms and slid to the floor.

When Vencel got outside the parking space was clotted with sedans. Raven and two F.C.C. men were looking at the transmitter. Trichak was running through the back door of the café. Colonel Catron came striding toward the trailer.

"Is she alive?" he demanded.

Speer jumped out of the trailer. "Yes, sir. She's hit in the shoulder, low. She'll be all right."

Catron glanced toward Raven and the group at the pumps. "He had to smell the whole thing out and come along."

From a window above the café Trichak called, "He got away, Raven."

Vencel found pleasure in speaking plainly. He said to Catron, "Where the hell were you all night?"

"On the hill with snooperscopes. You woke Okie up scraping away on the pumps. We didn't know you'd found anything. Raven refused to make a move until we saw the woman head for the trailer. Okie must have lit out before that. We couldn't see the outside stairs from where we were."

White came out of the trailer. He was shaken and upset. He pointed to the window in the trailer. For the first time Vencel observed that it was shattered. White's bullet had struck Mrs. Saunders, passed close to Vencel and then blasted through the glass.

"I had to shoot," White said. "All I could see was the cleaver."

He might have shot a second time if Speer had not shouted, Vencel thought. Vencel knew he should be grateful to White for stopping the cleaver, but reaction and weariness were gripping him now, and he was full of the bleak knowledge that the night had been largely a failure as far as Catron's interests were concerned; so he merely nodded at White's statement.

Vencel retrieved his .45. The stink of oil on his clothing offended him as he stooped over. He walked to the pumps and looked at the inside of the housing where he had found the transmitter.

One of the F.C.C. men said, "Five days ago the pump machinery was up where it belongs. A service man from the gasoline company checked that for us. Saunders had a clever arrangement there for dropping the whole unit without impairing its functioning."

Planned years ahead like everything else, Vencel thought bitterly. He watched four men carry Mrs. Saunders to one of the sedans. A soldier on the highway kept traffic moving past the filling station when curious motorists started to turn in.

Colonel Catron came over and said to Vencel, "Let's get some breakfast." If he was bitter or discouraged, none of it was in his voice.

On the way to the lake with Catron and White, Vencel saw one of Raven's men walking in the trees above the road a short distance from the three-gear pool.

When they passed the place where Harper had been killed, White said, "They turn out to be anybody, don't they? A woman, a harmless-looking little guy like Okie——"

Catron snorted. "Your idea of the enemy comes from a review in a newsreel or a newspaper picture. You'd better get your head examined. They're living next door to every stupid civilian who thinks things will come out all right if he pays his taxes and votes occasionally."

It seemed so, Vencel thought. Mrs. Saunders, a wonderful cook, a motherly sort of woman—a murderous woman dedicated to something that he could not understand. Collins. A fat, jovial fellow, the very prototype of traveling salesmen—and he had been part of the team selling destruction. Okie. A pinch-penny, chiseling little filling-station operator.

They live next door . . .

"I wonder what the men in the mountain would be like?" Lieutenant White said vaguely.

"I'll darned well show you before long," Catron said savagely.

Not as a result of anything he would find in Olson's tunnels, Vencel thought. He shifted in the seat, trying to ease his hip against the jolting.

They stopped at the sentry post on the front ridge. Vencel saw at once that the dark mouths of the tunnels were exposed. There were men over there on the shore. The float was standing in close to the ledge.

Catron sent the jeep scooting down the slope of the basin toward the camp, throwing dust that rose slowly in the hot air.

The colonel jumped out. "Come on!"

The guard detail on the south side of the first bore was seventy or eighty yards from the tunnel. Catron strode past the group, with Vencel and White at his heels.

There was slime on the floor of the tunnel. A tiny stream of water was seeping from the stringer of iron in the breast. All else was discolored limestone that had not felt the bite of a drill for seventy years.

Catron called to the sergeant of the guard detail and had him post a man at the portal. The crew on the raft watched curiously.

One by one Catron explored the tunnels. One was very much like another, and none was more than twenty-six feet long. The last two were on the north side of the fan of slide-rock that spilled into the lake.

Vencel watched the colonel's face. There was a great anger on it, compounded of frustration and bullheadedness that could not allow defeat. Catron sent for a heavy hammer, and while they waited, White and Vencel said nothing and did not look at each other.

After each inspection Catron had posted men at every portal. The hammer came. The colonel took it and went back down the line. At first he tapped the tunnel breasts and walls with exploratory mildness, but before he finished he was swinging the double-jack viciously against the rock.

He was like a man trying to uproot a redwood tree with his hands. Vencel stared at him and was disturbed. Catron's face was flushed. His eyes were cold blazes.

His hammer strokes were puny taps against the solidity of a mountain that rose thirteen thousand feet. No one had ever driven Olson's bores one inch deeper into Blue Peak after the old man left Grizzly Lake.

At last Catron dropped the hammer. He stood on the slimed ledge, breathing hard. The guards were extra-military and stiff in deference to his mood, but they watched him from the corners of their eyes.

When the colonel spoke the softness of his voice was in startling contrast to his savage expression. "You said eight tunnels once, Vencel? Why did you say eight?"

"I said seven or eight. There are seven."

"Why didn't you say six or seven then?"

"The maps of the mining claims show seven," Vencel said.

"I've made maps as inaccurate as anyone else," Catron said. "Were there seven tunnels or eight tunnels?"

He would not abandon a pet idea, Vencel thought; Colonel Catron was trying to substitute stubbornness and the chance of error in an offhand statement for reason. And yet as Vencel considered that he knew it was the same kind of stubbornness that had sent him to examine the second pump housing last night when he was sure it was like the first.

"I brought you up here for one reason, to tell me things about these tunnels that no one else would know." Catron spoke flatly. "I want you to walk this shore, to project your mind back to the other times you've been here, to remember every detail about these holes. You've fished this side of the lake?"

"A hundred times."

"Good. Walk along here as if you were fishing. There will be rocks that haven't changed. The tunnels themselves are in the same place. Let your mind ease into the past. Something has changed here, and you should be able to see it."

"All right." Vencel glanced at White.

"I'm tired, too," Catron said. "We're all damned good and tired. That doesn't mean a thing, understand?"

Vencel walked along the lake. He went down the years trying to recall details that he might have forgotten. Long ago the tunnels had all been blocked with doors, and over the cracks between the slabs Olson had nailed flattened tobacco tins to keep people from peering inside. Vencel thought it was the variation in locks and chains and in the pattern of the strips of tin that must have marked the difference in the tunnels in those distant years.

Now they all looked much the same. At the last tunnel south of the slide-rock he stopped. Just for a moment it seemed to him that the bore had been a few feet closer to the slide-rock long ago. He looked up the slide itself, a long channel that ran almost three thousand feet. Every year thawing and freezing loosened scales up there and snow slides also boomed down to pile debris on the ice.

There was nothing static about the slide-rock fan; some of it might have been carried into the lake.

At the end of an hour he was not sure about the memories that had come back to him without conscious effort. He knew then that he was straining, that any further effort would merely confuse him more. He stopped near a huge black rock rearing from the water a few feet offshore. Years before in the fading day he had lain on that rock and waited with a harpoon to try to spear the huge lake trout that cruised inshore when evening came. He was quite sure of that one memory.

Catron and White had not stood idle. They had taken the hammer and gone through each tunnel again, this time tapping carefully for hollow sounds. Vencel went back to them. He shook his head. "Everything is the same as I remember it used to be."

Catron stepped outside the tunnel. He pointed. "That slide-rock, Vencel—was there a tunnel in it?"

"No. A tunnel there wouldn't have lasted through the winter." Vencel looked at the black rock where he had lain so long ago. Just for an instant there was something wrong and confused in his mind, but he put that down to weariness and strain. The last tunnel south of the slide-rock was just behind the rock, right where it had always been.

Catron dropped the hammer a second time. "We all need a few hours of rest. Then we'll try again."

"Your hole must be somewhere higher," Vencel said. He saw Lieutenant White nod.

Catron stared up the great slideway where loose masses of rock were ready to roll at a touch. "We'll come back *here,*" he said.

They met Sillcott, detained by the guards from coming closer to the first tunnel. The restraint had put a glitter of irritation in his eyes. "Nothing, I presume?" It was a statement, not a question.

With what seemed to Vencel rare humility, the colonel said, "Nothing so far, Sillcott. Can you make some test to determine what lies beyond the headings?"

"Perhaps, if I were allowed near them."

"Seismograph refraction?" Catron asked.

Sillcott tossed the idea away with an impatient flick of his hand. "I assume you still insist that there is a chamber beyond one of the tunnels?"

"Yes."

"If so, and if it is reached by a twisting channel, I could not chart it accurately by seismograph refraction. Electrical resistivity——"

"Any way at all," Catron said. "Any way at all, without your lousy arguments and lectures." He told the sergeant of the guard detail to allow Sillcott and his men access to the tunnels.

"Thank you," Sillcott said loftily. He did not go near the tunnels; he turned away and went back toward camp.

The outboards on the big float exploded and the raft swung slowly out into the lake. The sonar men put on their headphones again. Looking back, Vencel saw a sentry standing at the portal of each tunnel. Guarding nothing, he thought.

Lieutenant Speer came down the hill. He looked as tired as Vencel felt, and when he saw Catron's face he did not ask any questions about the tunnels. "Raven called off the big man hunt, sir."

"I gathered, sir, that he was countermanded on the deal," Speer said.

Catron shrugged.

Speer said, "Vencel and me could still make a try for Okie and Bader, sir. Maybe——"

"Too late now," the colonel said. "Our work is here. Let Raven run them down if he can."

It might take Raven, or anyone else, all the rest of the summer to catch Bader, Vencel thought; and Okie would be slippery enough himself. Perhaps the two of them were working together. The thought was another straw of failure that bore heavily on Vencel.

They started up the hill and all of them walked slowly.

"I tagged Raven all the way to the hospital in Midway, sir," Speer said. "He wouldn't let me talk to Mrs. Saunders, but he did say that he got nothing from her on the way down."

"She'll never talk, not that woman," Catron said. "I see it now, she ran the whole show, not her husband. When it winds up, what have we got against her? Raven can't even prove that she knew about the transmitter in the pump, let alone prove that she used it." He stopped to rest. "Did she actually take a swipe at you with the cleaver, Vencel?"

"She wasn't kidding around with it. You should have seen her face, Colonel. She hauled that thing back——"

"All right," Catron said. "Attempted bodily injury or something like that. You were where you had no business to be. Technically, you were acting independently, although I approved the idea. You were a trespasser, a prowler. By the time the thing gets into court, she's likely to be suing the government for that wound she took." Catron was speaking bitterly. "The due processes of law may twist a new meaning into the whole affair."

"Even if they do," White said, "that still marks the difference between us and the devils we're after."

Catron grunted.

When Mrs. Saunders was advancing on Vencel, cornered in the trailer, he had held no doubt that she was the one who had killed Silvers. He still did not doubt it, but Catron's gloomy statements showed him the wide difference between intuition and evidence.

"When Raven finishes, I'll bet you'll see everything about the Saunderses sewed up tight," Speer said.

"A year from now," Catron said. He turned to stare at Blue Peak, and then he trudged on up the hill.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLEMENT RAVEN CAME BACK FROM MIDWAY with weariness lying on him like a great heat wave. He had dozed twice driving his jeep up the lake road, and the thought of that still frightened him. It meant, perhaps, that he was getting so tired he would lose efficiency. During his moments of greatest effectiveness Raven always doubted his own ability. At such times he was plagued with a fear that he had heart trouble or a brain tumor.

When physical examinations proved otherwise, he was always revitalized.

He went at once to the headquarters tent. Someone inside was typing rapidly, with a rhythm that filled Raven at once with admiration and envy. His own reports were always punched out slowly with four fingers. He went inside.

Lieutenant Speer was doing the typing. A boxer's fine co-ordination, Raven thought. Catron was lying on a cot with one hand over his eyes.

"Any luck on the tunnels?" Raven asked. Although the tunnels, he supposed, were close to the ultimate objective of this whole operation, his interest in them was more polite than real.

"Not yet," Catron said. "What about Mrs. Saunders?"

"She wouldn't talk." Raven hesitated. "I considered, only briefly, trying what you would have tried if you had caught one of the radio operators, but I couldn't do that, Catron."

"How about truth serum?"

"Illegal," Raven said curtly.

"I lost Radetsky, one of the best sergeants that ever lived," the colonel said. "That was illegal, too. God help Bader or Saunders or any other of those radio operators if I could get them with you not around."

"I know," Raven said quietly. "You could make an awful mistake, too, Colonel. Bader himself is following your line of thought at the moment. His name is Silvers. His father was the F.C.C. man who was found dead in the wrecked car on Columbus Pass.

"The boy—he's twenty-six—was in the F.C.C. himself for three years and one month. For the last twenty-three months he's been a guide at a lodge in the northern part of the state. He didn't swallow the story about his father dying by driving off the road, because his father was a very careful driver. Like you, Catron, young Silvers was enraged by the slowness of our methods. He came here himself to take a hand. He's all wrong, Colonel."

Catron said, "I can appreciate his thought. I hope he finds someone squatting in front of a ground-wave transmitter."

"I don't," Raven said. "He has a record of being quick-tempered. He'll destroy evidence."

"He'll eliminate an enemy," the colonel said. "I favor that."

"I don't, because this is only a small part of a large picture, and not all of the men we'll eventually corner will be as tight-mouthed as Mrs. Saunders." Raven hesitated at the door. "I'm sorry, Catron, that she wouldn't voluntarily give us the code." He went out.

"Voluntarily! For Pete's sake, sir!" Speer said.

Raven went to the first radio trailer and picked up three messages. The cancellation of his plans for a gigantic man hunt had been a bitter blow, but Raven wasted no energy railing against the decision. He went to his tent and decoded the messages. One dealt with Sergeant Radetsky's family trouble in Detroit. It did not shed any light on why the sergeant had died.

Another referred to a bit of metal that had been found in the brain of an F.C.C. man named Silvers; and the third confirmed the preliminary identification of a skeleton as the remains of a man named Gust Emil Olson.

A half hour later Trichak came in. He laid on Raven's desk a .45 pistol clamped between two sheets of plywood by bolts secured with wing nuts. The heavy bones of Trichak's face were blunt in the harsh light. His face would never be more Slavic in appearance than when he said, "Forrest found it, above the three-gear pool. It was above the road, about two hundred yards from the turn into the pool."

"How far above the road?"

"Nineteen feet from the cutbank."

"Any nicks to show that it had been thrown?"

Trichak nodded. "One on the slide."

"Why didn't the man go back and pick it up?"

"There were marks there, as if someone had walked around in his socks, searching. The gun had skidded between two rocks. Forrest said he walked past it three or four times before he found it."

Raven nodded. "How far did it lie from where we picked up Harper?"

"Three tenths of a mile."

"Get it on its way to the laboratory tonight. You won't have to request speed. They're waiting for anything we send in."

Trichak tore a page from a small notebook. "Here's the serial number." He picked up the gun and went out.

Just once it would be a pleasure to find a clear fingerprint on a gun, Raven thought; he never had. This one had been handled by his men as carefully as all the others, secured between wooden sheets to preserve all marks. The bullet that had killed Harper was already in the laboratory, sent there as soon as Trichak had found it embedded in a spruce tree. It was possible that ballistics tests would prove that the projectile had been fired by the .45 Forrest had found.

Raven thought he knew who had used the weapon; he was only human and his mind sometimes ran far ahead of hard evidence, but never far enough to cause him to act hastily. For a while he sat quite still, acutely conscious of the dry heat that seemed to have remained in the tent since the day it was erected.

Then deliberately he unlocked a desk drawer and shuffled papers until he found three pink sheets stapled together at the top. It was at moments like this that all the slow preparation sometimes ripened. He glanced just once at the number Trichak had written down, and then his bloodshot eyes went down the lists of numbers on the pink sheets, under semiautomatic pistols. The serial numbers of every weapon in Colonel Catron's command were there.

He found the number Trichak had given him. To the right of it: Lt. John Catron White.

Nothing changed on Raven's face. He clipped Trichak's note paper to the pink sheets and put them away. He heard Trichak's jeep go up the front ridge and stop at the sentry post, and a moment later it started down the first steep hill. He was in second gear, Raven thought; he should have been in first.

Raven got up and turned the gasoline light off. He was not as tired as he had been a few minutes before. Perhaps, after all, he would not need the reassurance of a doctor's examination when there was time for it.

He lay down on top of the blankets on his cot, remembering vacations in the mountains in other years when a man could not find enough blankets to put over him. Just before he fell asleep he thought that men like Colonel Catron and Vencel and a few other impatient characters must surely believe that they were the only ones who were trying hard to do anything about Blue Peak.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT DAYLIGHT CATRON AND VENCEL were on the ledge at the tunnels. Sillcott and three of his men had worked most of the night, and now they were coming out of a tunnel with cases of gear.

"What's the finding?" Catron asked.

"Try the next one, Glassner," Sillcott said to the thin, dark-faced man who had been on the mountain the day Harper was shot. To the colonel Sillcott said, "I have not completed my survey. When I have I will tell you what we have found. You realize, of course, that we had to make adjustments from equipment designed primarily to give impulses that show a specific reaction to uranium mineralized rock. This has delayed us, but when——"

"All right," Catron said. "When you're finished then."

"Yes." Sillcott jerked his head and walked away.

Vencel said, "Colonel, what makes you so set on the tunnels? I'm afraid——"

"It's got to be here." Catron moved away from the sentry at the portal. "When we started to drain the lake we got quick response from the radio, didn't we? The old miner, Olson, was killed here, wasn't he? And you yourself, who might have known something about these tunnels that no one else would know today, almost got it twice. We're near the right place, Vencel."

The colonel's determination made it seem so, but the facts did not. Vencel walked along the shore. The water went down deep and black at the outer edge of the shelf. Seven tunnels, and that was it. He stopped near the black rock where he had lain to harpoon a fish.

He remembered lying there in the dying sun and then until evening chilled him, and the fish had never come. He leaped out now to the rock and squatted there. The surface of it was irregular, a piece of blue granite with sharp ridges. It could not have weathered greatly during the last century, let alone the years since he had been a boy.

He shifted around on the rock clumsily. He could not even sit down in comfort; and after a time he doubted that a boy could have lain here and yet he remembered being flat on his stomach, with no memory of discomfort. He leaped back to the ledge and stared doubtfully at the rock.

"What is it?" Catron asked.

Vencel told him about the unsuccessful harpooning expedition. Catron's eyes took on an icy sheen. He said nothing.

Vencel was confused. The tunnel at his back was just the same, as he remembered, close to the slide-rock. Then, for an instant it was not in the right place; it should be closer to the slide. He was mixed up. The memories of boyhood are at once the sharpest and most confused of all. But one thing was sure, or he thought it was. He pointed. "The rock out there is not the one I lay on with my harpoon."

"Were there other rocks like it close by?"

"I can't remember. There might have been."

Catron stared grimly at the slide-rock fan. "Under that, say? Is the slide wider than it used to be?"

Vencel tried to summon sharpness from the mists of long ago. "I don't know, Colonel."

"I do. Your harpooning rock and the last tunnel are both under the slide-rock now, Vencel." Catron looked up the gray channel that seemed to run to the dirty sky above Blue Peak. He spoke then in a hushed voice charged with intensity. "They holed in. Men out here loosened slide-rock from above and let it cover everything. That's it. I've got them!"

The colonel's sureness was infectious. It carried Vencel into belief of everything but the last statement. The sight of Sillcott emerging from one of the tunnels reminded him that the scientist had confirmed the theory that everything could be blown to bits by remote control. Perhaps that was how the men in those other holes had died, not by their own action but by ruthless, efficient radio control from the outside. Okie might have everything ready now.

The colonel went quickly to Sillcott. The colonel made crisp, rapid speech in a low voice. Sillcott made a dubious lip. Catron punched his finger toward the slide-rock. Sillcott shrugged. He called his men out of the tunnel. They started back to camp with their equipment.

One half hour later Catron held a meeting in his tent for officers and other key men working on the mystery of Blue Peak. One of his general orders, effective immediaately, was a redoubling of the sentries around camp. He dispatched Lieutenant Speer to signal in all patrols now searching the peak above the lake level. Henceforth, no one could leave camp without written orders of Colonel Catron.

Vencel and Raven were at the meeting, standing like the rest. Sillcott was there also. He stiffened when Catron gave the last order. He said, "I must protest——"

"No protests are acceptable," the colonel said. "Immediately we will begin removing the slide-rock from where it spills into the lake. Major Arbaugh will command that phase. There will be no smoking within five hundred yards of the slide-rock. No firearms will be allowed closer than that. No radio messages will be sent from either the communications trailer of this organization or by means of the other unit now serving the combined agencies on this operation, without my approval."

The colonel listed other restrictions. With each one Sillcott's face grew more bitter. Clement Raven was thoughtful, his brown eyes flicking from face to face. Lieutenant White sat at a desk writing the orders as given.

"Questions?" Catron demanded.

"I have several telephone calls to make," Sillcott said. "I—ah——" He would not make a direct request for a pass. "They are relative to the matters we discussed at the lake. They must be made from Midway."

Catron stared at him. "Write Mr. Sillcott a pass for three hours, White."

Raven said, "I request a pass to Midway also. I would like to have Vencel accompany me."

The colonel nodded at White. "That will be all the passes for today."

"But, sir," White said, "I have to meet Sergeant Bowman down——"

"It can wait," Catron said. "Major Arbaugh, I want to discuss details with you." It was dismissal for everyone else.

Going down the mountain with Vencel beside him, Raven said, "So he thinks it's under the slide-rock?"

"It is."

"How do you know?"

Such evidence as there was would not suit Raven. Vencel said, "A hunch, let's say."

"A hunch is a glamorous synonym for a guess, Vencel. It proves true one time out of a hundred. One reason I wanted you to go to town with me is because I may be able to find something better than a guess. You know, don't you, people who have taken pictures of the lake from the front ridge?"

"Good Lord, yes!" How utterly simple that aspect was; and how easily overlooked.

Raven stopped the jeep. He cramped the front wheels toward the bank. He took out his notebook. "Give me their names now, everyone you can think of who may have taken pictures of the lake." He was not satisfied until Vencel had given him ten names. They went on down the road. Raven stopped again where Harper had been killed.

"Air currents and other factors vary considerably here, I suppose," he murmured. "When there's any air moving." He took a .45 from the glove compartment, pointed it toward where Harper had lain, and fired it once.

They went on to the three-gear pool. The sedan in which Sergeant Radetsky had died was gone. A private backed a car from the row, first looking under the hood before he got inside. There were two sentries on the highway side of the parking area now. They examined the passes closely before they let Raven and Vencel through.

"What was the shot for?" Vencel asked when they were on the highway.

"Something I thought of too late to save Radetsky."

They drove past Okie's place. A sign hung between the pumps: Closed. Another was in the café window. There was a ghostly look about the place already.

"It's likely that Saunders put the bomb on your car, Vencel. We've traced the fabrication of it to him. The case is made of an old-type electrical junction box. Okie had several such boxes, all of a peculiar type. The wires came from one of the junked cars he owned. We don't know where he got the T.N.T.—yet. He was seen coming from the old road where your car was parked the night before Harper removed the bomb."

"*Likely* that he did," Vencel said dryly.

"Insufficient evidence so far." Raven stayed behind a truck until the yellow line flicked over the other lane. "The day you came down the road with Speer, the day Harper was killed, what could you see of the filling station from the lake road at any point?"

"I could see the roof and some signs against the garage."

Raven nodded. "When you heard the shot you went directly up the hill once more?"

"Yes."

"Hurrying?"

"No." They had been over all this before. Harper's death seemed long ago; and there were more vital matters at the lake now, Vencel thought.

"You would not revise your estimate of the time you heard the shot?"

"No. Whatever I gave then is as close as I'll ever be able to guess."

After a while Raven said, "You're impatient for results, aren't you, Vencel? You'd like to see everything settled hard and fast."

"Yes."

"Catron's part of it will be that way. Mine won't. Believe me, there is tremendous energy being directed on this affair from all over the country. I'll grant you that Catron has a mighty problem, but if he's right about the slide-rock, his problem is pinned down. The other aspects of the affair may not be solved for years, some never.

"For example, I doubt that it can ever be proved who put the jawlifter into your creel. Tell me again every detail that happened in the canyon the day you found the jawlifter."

That too was history. Vencel described the incident. Raven probed and questioned and when he had extracted all that Vencel could recall he made no comment.

They entered Midway. Raven asked, "Do you have anything in particular that needs attention here?"

"Where's Olson buried?"

"He isn't. The remains will be sent back here soon, however."

"For burial by the county?"

Raven nodded.

"I'd like to do better than that."

"The story here is that he went back to Grizzly Lake and drowned. Please bear it out."

Raven drove to the courthouse. He asked Vencel to stay in the car. Presently Raven returned from the sheriff's office with three young men who were stamped in the same polite, competent-appearing mold as Trichak and the others who worked with Raven at the lake. He introduced them to Vencel and told him blandly that the one named Bedford would assist him in whatever business he had to take care of in Midway.

Nathan Bedford was most congenial and entirely uncommunicative. He accompanied Vencel to a mortuary, where Vencel made arrangements for the remains of Gust Olson to be buried when the skeleton was returned to Midway.

Standing on the street afterward, Vencel found himself with no desire to do anything more in Midway. He wanted to go back to the lake at once, to be there for the finish.

Bedford sensed his restlessness. He said, "I need a haircut. Would you mind going along with me?"

Vencel smiled. "I guess I can stand one, too."

They had the haircuts. Down here the normal business of the town was moving unhurriedly. Everything struck a sharp contrast with the grimness and straining at the lake. Vencel thought it might be just as well that such things as Blue Peak were kept from public knowledge.

Through the blistering heat they walked back to the courthouse. Raven was already there with two other men Vencel had not seen before. The F.B.I. was not shorthanded, Vencel thought. Bedford and the other two operatives stood in the shade of an elm and watched Raven drive away with Vencel.

"How was Mrs. Saunders?" Vencel asked.

"She was flown out of here last night."

"How'd she ever get into this mess?"

"Get into it?" Raven smiled. "She directed everything after the initial setup was made."

"Money?"

"Ideology."

"How about Collins?"

"Collins was a very successful salesman, Vencel. With him it was ideology, too."

"That makes the system dangerous, doesn't it?"

Raven nodded. "You've said something that every American must understand if we're going to beat our enemies."

When Raven stopped just before swinging out on the highway he took an envelope from his pocket and gave it to Vencel. "Have a look."

One of the pictures was old, almost brown. The other was more recent but old enough to show in the left corner Olson's cabin. Both had been taken from the front ridge when Grizzly Lake was down. There were eight tunnels.

The slide-rock fan did not look any different from what it was now, but Vencel knew it must be twenty feet wider than when these pictures were taken. He kept staring at them.

"They went in the first tunnel south of the slide," he said. "They drove it in and up and spilled their waste with the slide-rock already in the lake. What sort of men are back in there, Raven?"

"I don't know. God help them."

"I can't understand how they could have done that much work without attracting attention. Even light blasting at the lake could be heard on top of Columbus Pass, and there's always been highway maintenance crews on the pass."

"I don't know either. How are they getting air?"

"The mountain breathes," Vencel said. "Dynamite fumes were never any problem in Blue Peak, and then the slide itself is loose."

Raven followed a string of cars piled up behind a truck. One by one they whipped out and went around the truck, but he did not pass until the highway was clear for a quarter of a mile ahead. "Catron's time is almost up," he said. "I'll be sorry to see him removed."

"You don't think he can get into the hole without losing everything?"

"Do you?" Raven cast the doubt obliquely.

"Maybe they'll lose their nerve."

"That's possible," Raven said. "On one previous job of this sort the cave—it was an abandoned coal mine—was blown up by remote control. No, Vencel, it can't be done. I have every respect for Colonel Catron as a fighter and as an engineer, but he is no miracle-maker."

Although Vencel himself had been sustained by no more than hope that Catron would come up with something, his own engineer's training had told him there was no way to get the men alive from Blue Peak and the equipment intact, unless the operators chose to surrender. Still, to hear Raven say the same thought was depressing.

There was anger in Vencel when he said, "If they've known all along that the damned thing might be exploded from the outside, why hasn't there been more effort to scour the whole region around the lake?"

"There has been," Raven said quietly. "Catron's patrols covered the mountains. Since this affair started there have been ten men, experienced woodsmen, working the heavily timbered country on this side of the pass. You've never seen any of them. They're still out. I wanted to throw large posses into the search, but I couldn't get approval. I doubt now that a thousand men could have turned up anything. There's ten years of planning against us."

Raven was no pessimist; he was merely a hardheaded character, believing nothing unless there was a picture of it, a plaster cast, a carefully made file record or other documentary evidence. Looking at the great sweep of country ahead, Vencel knew Raven was right about one thing: a dozen transmitters could be hidden there and a machine to atomize all evidence in Blue Peak by radio control.

They were stopped at a road block that had been inactive when they came down. State patrolmen were making thorough inspections, including an examination of the trunk of every car. They recognized Raven. They made no exception of the sedan.

Where the guards barred the way to the three-gear pool a group had been stopped. Vencel first saw Bader (Silvers) and then he saw Okie Saunders, Sergeant Bowman and two bearded men he had never seen before.

Vencel went out one side of the car. Raven jerked the emergency brake tight and went out the other side. There was no humor around Okie's puckery eyes now. He looked at everyone around him with an expression of intelligence that would not give way to sullenness. His face was lumpy from mosquito bites. He had been beaten by someone's fists.

Okie stood between the two bearded men. The mark of the outdoors was on them, a calm intensity, reserve. In their eyes was the blue-cold look of manhunters who search for quarry and not for evidence.

One of the sentries, a corporal, said gruffly. "You heard the captain, Bowman. No one goes in without a pass. I don't give a hoot if it's Catron himself."

The corporal was tough enough, Vencel decided.

"All right, son," Bowman said. "Just relax until Catron sends somebody down with the order."

Raven pointed at Saunders and Silvers. "These two men are not going in at all. I'll take them, Bowman."

"No," Bowman said. "My orders——"

"I'll take them. Where did you get them?"

"Bader caught up with Saunders," Bowman said. "My men got both of them before Bader killed him. Some more of my men are bringing in some kind of radio Saunders was uncovering in an old prospect hole."

"I was going to drag him back alive," Silvers said sullenly. "I'd changed my mind."

One of the bearded men said, "It didn't look like you wanted him alive, the way you were slamming him around when we got there."

"You *are* Anthony Silvers, aren't you?" Raven asked.

"Yeah."

Okie sat down on the ground. "I want a lawyer."

He was, Vencel saw, of the same tough fiber as his wife. Looking at Okie Saunders, quiet, beaten and defiant, Vencel doubted that Colonel Catron would ever have made him talk. There were men who would die before they would betray their cause, and Okie looked like one of them.

This is the man, Vencel thought, whom I accepted as the penny-pinching operator of a roadside filling station. *They live next door. . . . They are as sure they are right as we are sure we are right.*

Lieutenant White arrived a few minutes later. The captain of the three-gear pool was with him, holding a paper. "Check the whole group through," the captain ordered. "Here's the colonel's pass."

The tough corporal said, "May I see it, sir?"

Raven looked at White. "Saunders and Silvers are going with me, Lieutenant. Bowman, will you detail your two men to me as escorts?"

"They're going to the lake!" White said. "That's the colonel's order, Bowman." His face blotched white with anger. "Bring them in, Sergeant."

Silvers's short laugh was a sneering commentary on the situation. He gave Vencel a didn't-I-tell-you look. Bowman balanced the niceties of the authority involved and then he looked at his two men and nodded toward the sedan. White started forward. The corporal barred the way. "Your pass, sir?"

The whole scene, Vencel thought, must be ludicrous to those who did not understand the undercurrents of the conflict. The captain was uncertain. He snatched the paper from the corporal. "It says to admit them. It doesn't say to put them under escort to the lake." Still he could not understand a sergeant's flaunting of Lieutenant White's order. He read the paper again and by that time Okie and Silvers had been put in Raven's sedan.

Raven drew Vencel aside. He gave him the pass. "Go up the hill by yourself." He wheeled away and started backing the sedan toward the highway.

Bowman said to the captain, "You called Sillcott?"

"He has your message."

"Did you tell him to meet me here?"

"Yes!" The captain plainly did not care for Bowman's insistence or his lack of military courtesy. It seemed to Vencel that he framed a sharp reprimand that died unborn under Bowman's steady look.

Still angry White said, "I'll take you up, Vencel."

"I'm not going right away."

White gave him an odd look, jerked around and strode toward the pool. He was driving away when Vencel and the captain reached the parking area. A half hour later the captain cursed when Vencel requested a jeep to go up the hill. "The lieutenant offered to take you up a minute ago!" Scowling, the officer called the sentry post on the front ridge. "There's a jeep on its way down. When it clears you can go up."

Sillcott arrived in a rush of impatience. "Where's the equipment?" he demanded of Bowman.

"I don't have it in my hip pocket," Bowman said. "Keep your shirt on. It was four miles away the last time I saw it."

"Take me to it at once!" Sillcott said.

The captain was more confused. You could not blame him, Vencel thought.

The guards on the front ridge argued about the pass Vencel presented. It was for two men, and he was only one. They would not let him pass until they had signaled the corporal of the guard, who came up and decided that Catron's signature was sufficient clearance.

The float was against the slide. Men were carrying rock from the shore to the raft, and on the ledge at both sides of the slide others were moving in a stream like ants.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN VENCEL WENT ALONG THE BEACH, guards stopped him a hundred yards from the first tunnel. A sergeant sent a private down the shore. The private talked to Speer and Speer talked to Catron, then the lieutenant came back to the detail.

There was a springy tenseness about Speer. He said crisply, "No matches or cigarette lighters past this point. No firearms. Talking in a low voice and only when necessary, and that will be damned little."

The only contraband Vencel had was a folder of matches. He turned it in, and then they made him pull his pockets inside out. After that Speer patted him for a gun, and he did not excuse himself by saying, "Orders."

So far there was only a small dent in the slide, just enough to expose damp rock. The work crew that Vencel approached was toiling in silence. Each man took a rock and walked up the shore to where a corporal stood, slid his burden carefully off the ledge and then got in line once more. Operation sweat. The surface of the lake was glassy. It seemed to be reflecting heat.

Grizzled Major Arbaugh stood on the raft, directing with his hands. Colonel Catron was on the slide itself, from where he could observe all three points of attack. He saw Vencel and nodded, and after a while he came down. The odor of perspiration was strong on him. His shirt was unbuttoned to the belt. He pointed up the gray channel and said in a low voice, "Does the slide run much in summer?"

"Yes, but not any great masses, as far as I know."

"What kind of barrier would you suggest?"

"Steel mesh, finer than a submarine net—if you had the time to get it anchored solidly."

"That was my thought, too," Catron said. "I'll take a chance on nothing big coming down. I'll have to."

Vencel told him about the pictures Raven had found. He wished he had been thinking fast enough to have asked Raven for them before they parted at the three-gear pool.

Catron said, "Of course the tunnel is there. How far into the slide from this side, or were the pictures good enough for that?"

"Not more than ten feet. When you uncover another black rock sticking up in the lake, you'll know the tunnel is directly behind it on the ledge." Vencel hesitated. "Once you've found it, how do you get inside without being blown to hell?"

The colonel shook sweat off his face. "Giving us the chance we need is Sillcott's problem." His face showed how much he disliked depending on Sillcott for anything.

"You know they got Okie and young Silvers?"

"I know. I wish I had Okie."

"It wouldn't do you any good," Vencel said. "I think you could kill him before he'd talk. How do you know there isn't another transmitter hidden out, or a radio-powered apparatus to blow the guts out of the tunnel?"

"There probably is," Catron said. "Do you want to go in with us, Vencel, when it's open?"

Vencel nodded.

"Ten feet, you say?" The colonel went back to his vantage point. He signaled Major Arbaugh with his hands, and soon the work detail on the north side came over the slide and joined the crew on the south side. Raven's quick action on the pictures had cut the work by three fourths, Vencel estimated.

Like ants with grains of sand the enlisted men moved steadily. Only the tiny scrapings of rock and the shuffling of feet broke the silence. It was so quiet that the sound of banging of a garbage can behind the mess tent came clearly. There were enough men on the south side of the slide now to eat the rock. Vencel saw that he could be of no help here.

He was loath to leave. Before long, with the small debris being moved rapidly, the tremendous rocks of the slide began to appear, stones that four men could not budge. What was needed, Vencel thought, was a heavy winch on the raft, something to replace the gasoline tugger that had lifted Olson from the lake. It would have to be manually powered to maintain silence, and outrigged against the shore to prevent the raft from tipping under heavy picks.

He saw Catron signal to Lieutenant Speer, and then point toward camp. Vencel walked up the shore with Speer. When they were beyond the restricted area the lieutenant said, "So you couldn't get anything out of Saunders? He looked to me like a rat that would spill his guts under pressure."

"He didn't to me. He looked like somebody I'd never seen before. What's Sillcott's plan to get inside the tunnel?"

"Sillcott? Hell, I didn't know he had an idea."

They stopped at the headquarters tent. White was just cradling a telephone. "The steel is at the three-gear pool now."

"How do they get through without a pass?" Speer asked. "Maybe I'd better go down."

"We'll send two of our drivers down," White said. "I've already got the pass. You'd better beat it back to the lake and tell the colonel."

Speer said, "Yeah." He strode away.

"Steel for a winch boom?" Vencel asked.

White nodded. "How come you didn't want to ride up the hill with me, Vencel?" He cocked his head to one side.

"I was waiting for a guy. He didn't show up."

"Oh?" White let it go. He let loose of it so readily that Vencel knew he was not deceived. "What's it look like at the lake, Vencel?"

"Like work, and then I don't know what will happen."

"Neither does Sillcott. I wouldn't trust him to do anything but get us blown clear to the east bank." White took a piece of paper from his desk and hurried away toward the motor pool.

When a tractor with a lowboy of angle iron and heavy plates growled up the last steep pitch, mechanics at the pool were ready. Acetylene torches were cutting and welding as soon as the first pieces of steel came off the trailer. By dusk the engineers had built in sections a high-angle boom that would swing by hand, working from a sketch that Catron had supplied.

Completed parts were taken to the float as fast as they were built and now welding torches were glowing on the lake. Under battery lamps the lines of men kept going and coming. Presently a large section of the work detail came in for chow, bare to the belts, with the sweat shining. It was evident that they were happy to be out of the restricted area but still they brought with them some of the hush that lived down there.

Vencel had stayed at the motor pool, lifting steel, holding it for welders. He saw Sillcott and Bowman drive in. They ran their jeep to one of the electronics tents, and there was a stir of excitement among the scientists.

Lieutenant Speer was back and forth between the lake and headquarters a half-dozen times. Catron stayed where he was. When he was no longer useful to the welders, Vencel went to the headquarters tent and asked Lieutenant White if there was anything he could do.

White shook his head, studying Vencel sharply. "Speer says it appears that there'll be plenty to do tomorrow afternoon." He was on the verge of saying something else and then the telephone rang. Raven was at the three-gear pool and could not get in.

"I left the pass with the sentry on the front ridge," Vencel said. "Couldn't I take it down?"

White shook his head. "One of Sillcott's crew has a pass to go out. He can take it. Effective at twenty-two hundred no one comes in or goes out."

Vencel walked out on the hill above the motor pool. He watched tiny figures on the float make the first pick with the crane. They pushed the boom around and lowered a huge rock gently on the deck. No sound came up to Vencel, and the silence itself was part of the threat that made tension pulse inside of him.

He climbed into a jeep at the motor pool. From there he had an unrestricted view of the work at the slide. The tightened feeling of the camp came to him through the talk of the men moving in and out of the tents. Cartwright was the last man down the mountain. Orders came from the lake that no one but Speer and Major Runyan could enter or leave the critical area until morning.

Night came down, closing out the stain above Blue Peak.

Raven was the last man to drive up the mountain. When he parked his jeep Vencel's voice from the darkness brought him around with a jerk. "Anything from Okie?"

"Nothing verbal," Raven said. He came over to where Vencel sat. "There were two gold teeth in his pocket."

Vencel felt his stomach twist. "Olson's?"

"Perhaps. He said they were war souvenirs that a Marine traded him for gasoline. We'll know soon whether they were Olson's or not."

Vencel had no doubts about the matter. Okie's petty greed had tripped him up. He had kept the teeth because they were gold, of trifling value but still they were gold. It was too bad Catron had not got hold of Saunders.

"What did you do with Silvers?" Vencel asked.

"He's in jail."

"What for?"

"Assault on Saunders, among other things." Raven lit a cigarette. The light showed his face drawn and pale. "He'll be released, I think." He hesitated. "Mrs. Saunders's cleaver killed his father. The laboratory established that a piece of metal found in Silvers's brain fitted exactly a nick broken from the corner of the cleaver she swung at you."

"It had been ground sharp again."

"That makes no difference. The fracture outline still existed in the part not ground away. It's probable that she is also the one who tried to kill you on the ridge. We recovered a pair of men's shoes. Harper's. The welt carried soil and rock fragments from Sharpe's Ridge and the Lucky Dog area. A tiny sore on her foot matched the position of a tack in one shoe. Her fingerprints were on the radio you found. So there appears to be some evidence against her, Vencel."

"Yeah. It appears."

"How is the work going here?" Raven asked.

"It's going. I don't know how well."

As Raven left he took something from his jeep. When he crossed the light of the mess tent Vencel saw that it was a rifle. It looked like a .22.

Slumped in the jeep, Vencel watched the lake. Each time the float began to ride low with its weight of rocks men pushed it away from shore. When it was well away from the slide the crew aboard pushed the rocks into the lake, and then the big raft was drawn back to the ledge with long lines.

Vencel knew the precautions at the lake were not preposterous. One heavy rock dropped at the entrance of the tunnel might be enough to warn the men inside.

It appeared to Vencel that Raven was closing his part of the operation successfully, gathering evidence that could not be disputed. Surely he must have fitted almost everything together by now. The older Silvers had caught up with the Saunderses. Mrs. Saunders had killed him.

Then Harper. They must have been on to him from the first. He had discovered something dangerous to them. He almost got clear, stopping on his way to do an act that had saved Vencel's life, then walking straight into death.

What was Raven's purpose in shooting at that very spot today? It was odd that no one at the pool near the highway had commented about the shot. They surely had heard it, just as Radetsky had on the day Harper was killed; and on that day there had been a dozer working on the road.

Now Radetsky was gone, killed by a bomb intended for Sillcott. Or had it been set for Sillcott? All at once Vencel began to doubt the obvious. He could make nothing complete of the unco-ordinated facts he knew about Radetsky.

Raven undoubtedly knew plenty that he could not reveal. He probably knew a lot about Collins now. Men did not pay their debts to Raven by dying. He would not be satisfied until he had unwound all the details of their lives, fitting pieces together, binding them with cold evidence.

He had seemed interested in the signs leaning against Okie's garage. Vencel had observed once that they had been moved. He could not remember now much about the signs, except that one was mainly white and that another had a great deal of green on it. Then all at once the significance of them struck him. They had been used to signal with. By prearranged code anyone passing on the highway could receive a simple message.

But Raven had asked Vencel what he had seen of the filling station *from the lake road.* Vencel remembered that he had been aware of the signs and that was all. Suppose they had been set to signal that Harper had discovered damaging facts. From any place high on the mountain, clear of the heavy timber, the signal could have been seen. Someone had read it, then met Harper just before he reached the lake road.

Vencel now knew why Raven had warned him not to ride to the lake with anyone. Raven was suspicious of someone in the camp itself.

Lieutenant White had been the only man with whom Vencel could have ridden up the lake road this afternoon. Where had he been the day Harper was killed? Vencel supposed Raven must have checked into that thoroughly; but at the moment White was in the headquarters tent, Colonel Catron's nephew, his aide.

In the still hot night Vencel sat alone with his disturbing thoughts. He restrained a desire to go trotting to Raven, who must know ten times more about everything that had happened than he himself ever would.

Two radio men, relieved of their duties, dropped down from one of the trailers and walked toward a latrine close to the motor pool.

"Did you hear what Makris said when he came back from headquarters?"

"I didn't catch it all."

"General Hillton, the President's trouble-shooter, and two other civilian wheels down at the three-gear—now. White wouldn't let 'em in. No passes. I guess the phone was jumping. Makris said White turned green, but he said no dice, not until he got the go-ahead from the colonel."

"They'll get in all right, don't worry. What are we on here, Bill?"

"Uranium, the biggest pile in the world."

"Uranium hell! That's old-fashioned. We got something better than that. Did you ever see so many officers in one army outfit in all your life?"

The radio men went on to the latrine. When they passed Vencel a few minutes later they were talking about chow.

He watched the work at the slide. It could happen any moment: a deep-gutted *chooming* sound from somewhere in Blue Peak, smoke drifting upward from the slide-rock —and it would be all over here. Then it would start again somewhere else.

Bombs on factories and sprawling railroad yards and smoking mills and great buildings of steel and concrete could never do the withering damage to America that machines like the one in Blue Peak could do. Hunger had lived before all else.

The man came boldly through the darkness from the west side of the pool. Tools in a kit on the lowboy rattled, and then a thin beam of light sprang. It showed no more than a hand reaching into the metal box, a long, thin hand that was blistered red. It took a pair of side-cutters. The light went out and the man went up the hill.

He came back shortly afterward, put the pliers back, and walked straight down the street between the tents. When the light outlined him Vencel saw that it was White.

Vencel spent the night sitting in the jeep. At times he dozed, then roused to watch the eerie lights throwing streaks on the water near the slide-rock. Once he woke up with a start when a strong light struck his face and an unfamiliar voice said, "This is him, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Speer said angrily, "Why the hell didn't you say where you were going to be, Vencel?"

They were checking the whole camp, taking a muster. Before dawn the detail came around again.

The black surface of the lake came slowly out of the night. There should have been a chill to rattle teeth, with cold mists edging the water. It was still hot. Vencel saw the dying grass on the hill, the somber darkness of the trees, and the dirty sky above the peak. He was prey to black thoughts. He dragged his aching hip from the hard seat of the jeep and went to get some coffee.

The scientists were in a huddle at their table in the open air. They looked as if they had been up all night. Sillcott came out of headquarters with Glassner. "A simple device like a phone," he muttered. "Catron can't keep anything in order."

Vencel looked up the hill where White had gone last night with the pliers. The ground communications line was strung in that direction. A simple matter of cutting the lines should not have kept it out of business long.

When Vencel got inside the restricted area he saw Colonel Catron standing on a rock a few feet from shore. It was, Vencel knew, the fishing rock of long ago. The slide still covered the tunnel. The engineers were working from the top now, instead of from the side, moving stones to make a small opening.

Catron said, "This is your rock, Vencel." He had been up all night. His face was pale, but he was driving so intently now that fatigue would not catch up with him for a long time.

Raven was sitting in a rubber boat twenty feet offshore. His brown face moved from side to side as he watched each man who approached the slide. His attitude was that of careful, deadly waiting. Major Arbaugh was on the slide. As each man came up to take a rock the major made the selection, touching the stone with a slender stick, and then he watched fiercely to see that it was handled gently. When there were huge rocks to move Major Arbaugh set the sling on the end of the winch cable.

Squatted beside him was one of Sillcott's men with a small, square instrument to which was attached a wide-mouthed cone. At intervals the work was stopped. The man placed the cone near the deepest penetration into the slide and read his instrument. He was testing, Vencel knew, the movement of air.

"So far the air flow is out," Catron said. "Is that normal for workings in this district?"

"It is, when the surface of the mountain is warm. All the old horizontal workings have an in-draft just above floor level. It varies with the rock. If you figure to pump some kind of gas——"

"I don't plan to pump gas inside."

When Sillcott's man made the next test he looked quickly at Catron and held up two fingers. Major Arbaugh hooked his arm at Speer, who came up quickly with his arms full of blankets. The major began stuffing them into openings between the rocks. The man with the air-flow gauge kept testing. At last he nodded at Arbaugh.

Vencel let out a long sigh, as if he had been holding his breath. Any sudden change of air currents inside the mountain would surely be a warning to the men in there.

From then on the work was considerably slower.

Shortly after noon Major Arbaugh knelt in the rocks until his body was almost obscured. He straightened and took a flashlight from his pocket and knelt again. After several moments he beckoned to Catron.

The colonel said, "I want you to take a look, Vencel."

They went out on the slide. Arbaugh touched the folded edges of a blanket with his stick. He gave the light to Catron, who knelt and looked for several moments. He rose carefully and gave the flashlight to Vencel.

With his face almost muffled by the blanket, with the light thrust past the folds, Vencel stared until his eyes became adjusted. He was peering down about seven feet to a rocky floor where water ran. He saw the walls of the tunnel.

There was a warm, living smell in his nostrils. He could not have described it, but it was vastly different from the cold, dead odor of a long-abandoned mine. He was sniffing the lair of something alive and deadly. He adjusted the blanket and stood up.

Catron stared at him.

"It's the start of one of Olson's tunnels."

The colonel signaled to Speer. Soon all the working soldiers were on their way to camp. Catron said, "It's up to Sillcott now."

"Aren't you going to open it any farther?" Vencel asked.

"Later," Catron said.

Sillcott's aide took another series of readings. He made a trifling adjustment of the blankets, and then he crept off the slide. It seemed to Vencel that he was glad to get away.

Major Arbaugh sat down in the rocks. Catron and Vencel started up the shore. When they were even with Raven's boat Catron said, "That's it for a while, Raven." Raven nodded, and then once more he was motionless.

The big float had been cast off, and already it was drifting away from shore.

When the colonel and Vencel were clear Catron said, "This afternoon, Vencel—if Sillcott comes through."

"And if he doesn't?"

"I'll go inside anyway."

And that would be suicide. Trying to creep up on men inside that hole would be like trying to inch up on a rattlesnake poised in its striking loop. When Vencel told the colonel he would go into the hole he had thought that Catron surely had in mind some plan to neutralize the deadliness of the occupants.

They walked toward the camp. "I hear you have distinguished company down the hill, Catron."

"You shouldn't have heard it! Loose-tongued radio men, eh?" Catron walked a few steps farther. "General Hillton is there with a committee. I reported yesterday that I had the entrance to the hole. I got orders at once to suspend activity until further notice.

"The further notice is at the three-gear pool now. One look, and Hillton will say I can't go inside and risk men. I know him. We were at the Point together. He never would tackle the impossible. He'll order me to blow the tunnel to hell and start somewhere else when the odds are better."

Vencel asked, "You don't know Sillcott's plan?"

"No. He's taking a perverse pleasure in not telling me anything. I don't think he'd tell Hillton either."

"You had White cut the telephone line last night," Vencel said. "That won't keep Hillton away from here."

"It kept him quiet for a few minutes—until he got to a radio. I'm too busy to read radio messages, Vencel."

Catron was going to be a nicely browned goose unless he came through.

"I had the road blocked too," the colonel said, "just in case Captain Finch at the three-gear pool became overawed by stars."

Catron was playing it go-for-broke. You had to admire his guts. *I'll still go inside with him,* Vencel thought. "Sillcott didn't even hint at his plan?"

"No. He said all he needed was an opening into the tunnel the size of a man's fist. We've got that now."

They stopped at headquarters. Rudy Trichak and White were facing each other. The lieutenant was angry. There was a .45 pistol on his desk.

"I said it was my gun, Trichak!"

"The serial number——"

"To hell with the serial number! That's the gun that was issued to me. I've had it around for six months. I ought to know it."

"What's the trouble?" Catron demanded.

Trichak eyed him warily. "Lieutenant White's gun doesn't check against the serial number of the gun he was issued."

"Oh, hell!" Catron said. "What of it?"

"There's quite a bit." It was evident that Trichak did not know how far to go. He hesitated. "We have the gun that was issued to Lieutenant White."

"That's it right there!" White hit the desk. His anger softened abruptly. "Unless—unless right at the start Speer and I got our .45's mixed up. We could have."

"Lieutenant Speer's pistol checks out," Trichak said. "The one you say is yours is not on our records."

"What are you people doing with records of my ordnance?" Catron snapped. His voice dropped to a low pitch. His color rose, and his anger bulged against the surface of his face. "I'm tired of your getting in my way."

There was no retreat in Trichak's manner. It was merely a matter of caution against revealing too much. He said, "We'll talk about it later."

"Much later," Catron said. "Don't expect any great support from Raven. I've already had it out with him about the way he took Saunders away from me."

Trichak left. The colonel eyed his nephew coldly. "What is it about your .45 that has them baying, Lieutenant?"

White shook his head. "I don't know, sir."

To Vencel he appeared puzzled and sincere.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CLEMENT RAVEN SAT IN THE RUBBER BOAT with no one to watch now except Major Arbaugh slumped down in the rocks where the drab edges of blankets showed. The barrel of the .22 rifle beside Raven was hot from the sun. He could smell the rubber of the boat.

For once in his life he had run against a wall. All the solid, unsensational work had not been enough. An ordinary man would have said it was more than sufficient, but to Raven it was nothing. Colonel Catron's prejudices had been too strong to make him listen, and he had been in a mighty rage about losing Okie Saunders. And so with time run out, Raven was doing something that was a violation of all his careful training.

He was waiting here watching for a man to make one wrong move that would justify Raven's shooting him. Raven had never killed a man or even shot at one. He felt doubt concerning the soundness of his idea, the guilt of one who had abandoned for the spectacular the methods of an investigative system that functioned with hardly any violence. There was no shrewdness in this plan, no method, only expediency because time was gone. The whole thing offended Raven, the more so because it was his own idea and he could think of no better.

He twisted his body against a small pain in his left shoulder. He wondered if Trichak had achieved any success in warning the colonel. Trichak disliked Catron thoroughly; and on top of that Raven had ordered Trichak not to reveal anything, not to mention Harper's name.

No, it was unlikely that Trichak had got any place. The colonel's neck was bowed, and he was going like a driving fullback. By cutting off the lake he had brought everything here under his domination. Raven did not doubt that he would close out the radio trailer of the combined agencies if it suited him. The thought of being shut off from communication with the laboratory, blocked from getting information from files, jarred Raven.

He wished he could have a cigarette. The small pain in his left shoulder nagged him. He knew it must be from the strain of sitting rigidly so long; but still his old fear of heart trouble returned. He leaned back. The boat rocked under the shift of weight, sending widening rings along the quiet surface of the lake. The pain in Raven's shoulder eased. Perhaps, after all, he was as sound as when he had been examined two months ago.

He wondered what Catron would do if he found out about the rifle. The colonel, overriding Lieutenant Speer's protest, had allowed Raven to row in here and anchor without being subjected to a search.

After a few moments the hot sun began to relax Raven. He sat up quickly, afraid of dozing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NOW THE AFTERNOON WAS SLIDING AWAY. The tension of those who waited on the beach gave the feeling of an explosive force too long contained. Catron stood still and gave the effect of pacing. He kept staring at Sillcott, who was writing in a notebook. Seated near the scientist, Vencel craned to see what he was doing. It was a problem in simple geometry, but Sillcott was working at it as if it were the solution to Blue Peak.

Speer and White stood side by side. Wound up as if he were ready to shoot out of his corner in a ring, Speer kept looking toward the dam. The guards at the edge of the restricted zone shifted back and forth. Beyond them a dozer that had lumbered through the mud at the inlet was waiting with the skinner in the seat and two mechanics standing near the pony engine. Beyond the dozer was an air compressor.

On the far side of the lake the float was drawn close to shore, stripped now of the winch. The doghouse was gone, and the sonar well had been planked over. The surface of the float was flat. On the shore near it a group of men waited. The smoke of their cigarettes was visible.

Everything hinged now on Sillcott, who had kept his silence, except to give the orders about stripping the float. Now he worked a problem in high-school geometry, smiling to himself.

Motionless offshore Raven sat in his rubber boat, and Major Arbaugh sat quietly on the slide.

A runner from one of the radio trailers approached the guards on the south side of the slide with a sheaf of messages. Lieutenant Speer looked inquiringly at Catron. The colonel shook his head. After a while the runner sat down and stuffed the messages into his shirt pocket.

Sillcott worked his insignificant problems, now and then looking up at Catron with a slanting glance of sly amusement.

Another half hour crept away. Vencel heard the distant humming sound. It grew. Everyone on the beach but Sillcott was standing. Then there was a steady roar near the dam, and moments later the helicopter came into sight, a skeleton-tailed dragonfly hovering cautiously.

It hesitated and then it whirred above the surface of the water and set down gently on the float. The pilot cut the engine at once.

Two six-man rafts shot out from the group waiting near the float. Men bustled around the helicopter. The boats came toward the slide, the aluminum paddles dipping silver. Vencel stared curiously at small boxes in the boats.

When the rafts neared shore Sillcott rose, put his notebook away and said imperiously, "Everyone will please stay fifteen feet away from the experiment."

Experiment. What a hell of a time to be experimenting, Vencel thought. He moved back with the rest.

The boats pulled away. Glassner and two more of Sillcott's men were left behind with six parcels. Two of the boxes were metal crates with perforated tops. From inside them came scurrying noises and squeals. Sillcott directed the work quickly. Glassner unboxed what appeared to Vencel to be a small, squat radio. The other two men began to lift rats from the crates. To each of them they harnessed an apparatus consisting of two small metal tubes with pole antennas.

There were eighteen rats in all, long-snouted, hungry, vicious-looking rodents, but the two men handled them without gloves and neither was bitten.

When all the rats were harnessed and returned to the crates Glassner glanced at Sillcott, who nodded. Glassner turned a dial on his equipment. The rats grew nervous. He kept twisting and making adjustments until the rodents were in a frenzy, leaping at the sides of the crates, squealing.

Sillcott held up his hand. Glassner spun the dials. The rats became quiet. Vencel looked at White and Speer. They were staring in slack-jawed fascination. Catron's eyes were cold and steady as he watched.

"Everyone will stay back, please." Sillcott nodded to his assistants. He marched ahead while two men carried the crates into the slide. Glassner knelt before the radio. Catron walked over to him. "Are those receivers you put on the rats?"

"Of a sort, yes." Glassner's voice was so low that Vencel stepped closer to hear him. "They're rectifiers, germanium impregnated with helium, to convert alternating current into direct current. We have more recent developments but this was immediately available. The second tube on the carriers is a gas container.

"With the transmitter we can shock the rats, prod them, in a manner of speaking, into moving. They have already been used extensively in other experiments so that they are conditioned to continue moving until they are beyond the range of the transmitter."

"How far is that?" Catron asked.

"The range varies. Under the conditions here——" Glassner frowned. "I can't make an accurate prediction."

"What kind of gas?" the colonel asked.

"BR-3, a recent development by Doctor John——"

"You can release it from that?" Catron pointed at the transmitter.

"Oh, yes, indeed. It is odorless and colorless. On the average three inhalations, such as in normal breathing, decrease oxygen in the blood stream causing insensibility with symptoms much like those of a man who collapses at an extreme altitude."

"How long is the effect?"

"Under ideal conditions in a laboratory I believe the duration is approximately one hour. However, except for a short period at the beginning, the coma is not due to oxygen starvation but rather to a toxic effect not fully understood. As Sillcott explained it to me, BR-3 has been tested so far only on baboons. As a matter of fact, the gas is completely out of our field of interest. Even Dr. John Veltrie, who developed it, would not predict its action underground where moisture may prove to be a disturbing factor."

Catron grunted. Vencel looked at Speer and White. They did not look happy.

Close by in the lake Raven had pulled up his rock anchor and was paddling toward shore. A light rifle lay across his knees.

Over on the slide Sillcott signaled, first catching Glassner's attention by wagging his hand, and then Sillcott held his hand out horizontally and made a slight rising movement with it. Glassner turned the dial gently. One of Sillcott's men was lying face down in the rocks with just his legs showing. He was, Vencel guessed, watching the rats in the hole and relaying to Sillcott information on their behavior.

After a minute of gradually increasing signals Sillcott swung his head in a leveling movement. He left the rocks and came back to Catron. "They have all moved away, into the mountain," Sillcott said.

Catron stared at him. "How do you know when to release the gas?"

"I have no way of knowing. Presumably the rats will advance steadily under the irritation of the shocks. How deep is your tunnel, Colonel Catron?" Sillcott smiled.

The test of a man came at a time like this, Vencel thought. He saw Catron return Sillcott's cold smile. "So it's all mine from now on, eh, Sillcott?"

Sillcott nodded.

The colonel looked out upon the lake. A tiny muscle in his jaw was jerking, but otherwise his face was calm. He exuded the confidence of a man who knew exactly what he was doing, instead of one who was guessing. He said to Glassner, "They will not be squealing from the shocks, will they?"

Outwardly Glassner was not nervous, but his voice trembled when he said, "They shouldn't be, Colonel. They're getting less than a fourth of the power we used to test out here when they were squealing."

"They're used to men?" Catron asked.

Glassner nodded. "They were born in a laboratory."

"I see." Catron appeared not to notice that Raven had come ashore with a rifle. "They'll trot along steadily trying to get away from the shocks. They might go rather fast." He paused and said calmly, "Release the gas."

Glassner turned two control knobs. He listened to a slight humming for an instant, and then he flipped a switch.

Vencel half expected to hear a terrific explosion, to see rocks and blankets flying across the lake. But—just the tiny noise of the switch and everybody but Catron staring at the transmitter as if it were a TV screen.

"Now," the colonel said, "we'll let the gas drift on your in-draft on the tunnel floor, Vencel." He had a way of placing responsibility by use of the possessive pronoun. "We'll let them have their three inhalations, eh, Glassner?"

"Yes, sir," Glassner said doubtfully.

The colonel was talking like a crazy man, Vencel thought; but he was doing a superb job of making wild guesses sound like fact. Only Sillcott was unimpressed. He looked at Catron as if the man had lost his senses. Someone had to guess at the behavior of the rats underground, at the depths of the tunnel. Vencel was glad that the responsibility was not his.

"We have one hour now," Catron said. "Perhaps less if your dampness factors cross us up, Glassner." He stepped away from the group and looked upshore. After the hours of talk scarcely above a whisper, the colonel's shout was a sudden shocking violation. "Bring the dozer!"

The mechanics at the dozer jumped. The pony engine cracked into life and shortly afterward the heavy diesel was shuddering. The operator brought his rig grinding down the ledge. Behind it a crew of men pulled a portable compressor on wheels.

Standing at the tiny opening in the slide, Major Arbaugh indicated a diagonal movement against the rock, then pushed his palm toward the lake. The dozer blade came down. The operator went in, angling against the slide-rock. Stones began to splash into the lake, making heavy bumping noises under water.

Vencel did not see the second helicopter until White nudged him. It was a big army job with high-altitude rotors. When it was above the middle of the lake, it crabbed as if to spot its course, and then it came to the west side and hovered over the ledge. A gray-jowled man with bristling eyebrows leaned out and shouted at Colonel Catron.

Vencel recognized him. General Hillton. He had the same tough fighting expression as the colonel. The noise of the helicopter and the bellowing of the dozer, which did not pause an instant, made conversation impossible. Catron cupped one hand at his ear. He smiled. He pointed toward the front ridge, where there was open, level ground.

Hillton glared at the colonel. He pulled back into his seat and the helicopter went churning toward the ridge.

Catron swung his arms violently, signaling the catskinner to greater speed.

Rocks ground away from the portal of the tunnel, grating, splashing into the water. The helicopter settled on the front ridge near the sentry post. Two jeeps were waiting for it. There was some delay, and then the jeeps came racing toward the inlet.

"Faster!" Catron yelled at the dozer operator.

General Hillton's group were out of the jeeps and slogging through the mud at the inlet when Arbaugh signaled for the dozer to stop. It backed away. The skinner cut his engine to idling speed and then the sound of the compressor was audible. The crew ran it close to the slide. Another group strung out long lines of air hose on the ledge. A sergeant came up with six electric lanterns.

Catron took the man's .45. "One is plenty," he said when Speer looked around for someone else with a sidearm. Catron tolled off names quickly. "White, Speer, Vencel." There was a little time left. Hillton's group was just nearing the far end of the ledge. One of the men with him was Bowman.

Raven laid down his rifle. "I'm going in," he said quietly.

"Help yourself." Catron looked at Sillcott. "How about you?" He smiled.

"My life is more valuable than yours, Colonel," Sillcott said. It was not a sneer on his face, Vencel decided; it was merely the man's natural expression. "However," Sillcott went on, "I should not like to see the equipment inside handled by any of your men, Catron, so I will accompany you. It is not a matter of courage. That is an emotion. I will go because it is necessary."

Catron grunted. "By God!" he said. "You'll lecture when you're dying." He took one of the electric lanterns.

When they were in the slide the colonel said, "Clear everybody away, Major. This hole may go to hell any second."

Major Arbaugh nodded bleakly.

Catron led. They scrambled into the cool, muddy portal. Speer and White dragged the air hose with them. Stealth had no value now. It was speed. Vencel tried to take hope from the fact that nothing had happened when the dozer was making a fearful noise at the entrance. Raven crowded past Vencel to get in the middle of the line. The hard bulge of a gun in his pocket bumped against Vencel's hip.

The colonel went in like a terrier. Close behind Raven's broad, short back Vencel stumbled along, trying to keep his mind on things close at hand instead of unknown things ahead. He put the hose under one arm. Sillcott was the only man behind him.

They went the short length of Olson's tunnel, and then there was a joining that made Vencel stare. The varying coloration of the lime from water stain told Vencel that not more than two short round had been needed to join the tunnel with a natural cave. The passage swung abruptly to the right. The walls were iron stained.

All surface light died with the turning. The lanterns showed lake slime on the walls. The warm, living odor was powerful. All at once the passage widened, revealing great slabs of loose rock on the right. Vencel grasped the nature of the whole formation then. In ancient times the cavern had opened on the lake. The heading of Olson's tunnel had been quite close to the cave, so close that electronic soundings, perhaps, had revealed the hollowness.

The cave slanted upward abruptly. Soon the lack of water markings showed that they were above the highest level of the lake. Now there was a strong in-draft that came from above. This was fractured ground and air would always circulate through the looseness. Except in winter when heavy snows covered the surface.

In winter the men inside might have died of suffocation; but they had been put here to serve and die anyway. All at once Vencel's interest in the geology of the cavern gave way to an almost overwhelming dread of what was farther in.

Sillcott gave him a push. "Don't lag, please."

"Help drag the hose," Vencel said, "and you won't be in such a hurry."

Catron stopped suddenly. The hissing of the air nozzle was loud. He passed something back. It came from hand to hand and Vencel jerked when he touched it.

A dead rat, still warm. He thrust it quickly into Sillcott's hand.

"Ah, yes," Sillcott said. "Rats are individuals, you know, some more stupid than others. This fellow possibly became confused and started coming back instead of going away from the impulses that——"

"Put in in your pocket. Lecture some other time," Catron said. "How much hose is left?"

Speer said tensely, "We'll know when we come to the end of it."

Vencel began to sniff.

"The gas is odorless," Sillcott said. He dropped the dead rat.

The cold lights on ancient walls, the leaping shadows, the hollow sounds of their steps created an impression of unreality in Vencel's mind. He wondered if the men ahead were overcome by gas, or waiting, waiting to take as many enemies with them as they could. Everything was in favor of those who waited.

The cavern twisted, narrowing, then widening. They found four dead rats, their jaws wide and rigid. In spite of himself Vencel sniffed again. White was doing the same. A little farther and the hose ran out. They tugged on it. It was fouled or else there was no more. It was the last of the outside and Vencel did not want to leave it. But they followed Catron's orders. They piled rocks around the nozzle to keep the air stream directed in. And then they went on.

After fifty feet the colonel stopped again. He spun a cigarette lighter. The flame went up then bent toward the outside of the cave. He held it near the floor. The flame tipped in.

"Well, Vencel, your in-draft near the floor is holding true."

"Yes, sir." Vencel wished there had been a tremor in Catron's voice, for a man could always take some courage from another's fear. The light went out. It seemed to Vencel that the flame had blossomed and receded oddly. He sniffed.

They reached a pile of stores, the bottom cases held off the floor by logs. Now there was a dryness and a coolness about the cave.

Catron's voice came thickly. "Here's your rats, Sillcott."

The bodies of the rodents were spilled on the cases. They lay on their backs on the floor, their sharp teeth gleaming, as if they had died fighting a visible attacker. Sillcott played his lamp upon them. "I think that's all." He rubbed his wrist across his eyes. "We'd better go back to the hose for a while."

"No!" Catron's voice was hollow.

The passage narrowed. They came to a junction, and on the left there was a slab door. "Give me all the light," Catron said. He jerked the door open. A nauseous odor came out with the force of a blow. This was a latrine.

Vencel's stomach turned when he saw a dead man lying in the farther recesses of the opening.

Catron banged the door, but the odor was still thick and sickening. "He died, or he went nuts and they had to kill him."

White began to gag.

"Stop that!" Catron ordered sharply.

"Yes, sir," White said, and went right on retching.

They took the right-hand passage. It widened. They passed stores, tools leaning against the wall, carboys of acid, batteries, and a hand generator that seemed to have been discarded.

They came into a room. There were four men.

One lay in a sleeping bag against the wall. His face was staring at the overhead and his eyes were open. A clean-shaved, slight man lay on the floor near a long bench, one arm extended toward a stack of boxes under the bench. Two men in filthy parkas sat at a long plank table opposite the bunks. One was wearing headphones. Both were bearded. They had slumped forward on the table. The faces of all the men were as pale as things that live under rotting logs.

The cavern either ended here or else its continuation was blocked by the massive banks of electronics gear that covered the far wall. Green and red pilot lights were glowing below the delicate hands of indicators that wavered slightly. There was a gentle humming in the room.

Sillcott pushed past Vencel. He said, “Ah!” in an enraptured tone, and then he lowered his head and rubbed his hand across his eyes.

Catron went across the room to the high bench toward which the man on the floor was reaching. Blinking, with a deadness creeping around his brain, Vencel saw the colonel lean with both hands on the bench; and he saw under the bench a hand detonator for exploding all the cases of T.N.T. stacked there.

Catron swung around slowly. He dropped his lamp when he made pushing motions with his hands. “Out . . . side . . .” he muttered. He staggered across the room.

It seemed to Vencel that they walked in slow motion, like divers at great depths. Speer was ahead of him going out. The lieutenant kept bumping the wall, catching himself with both hands.

“Raven, Raven,” Catron murmured somewhere behind Vencel.

“Coming,” Raven said faintly. He was the last in line. His lamp clattered as he pushed along the wall for support.

They reached the cases where the dead rats lay. Vencel broke his stride and nearly fell when he stepped on one. The air grew better as they stumbled farther from the room.

“Lie down!” Catron’s voice had more strength now.

They lay upon the floor. The cold flow of air into their lungs was life and mercy. There was a dead-tired sensation in Vencel’s legs, but his head was clearing. He did not want to rise when Catron stood up and said, “Come on. We’ll drag those men out of there.”

They got up slowly. Vencel’s light swung across Raven’s face. Raven was staring with terrible intensity at Lieutenant Speer. He stepped toward Speer. The lieutenant drove

Raven back with a flicking punch that snapped his head.

Speer whirled around. Vencel caught a glimpse of his eyes, black points of ruthless savagery. The knee aimed at Vencel's groin crashed into his thigh as he twisted. It exploded agony in his hip. Speer tore the lantern from him and ran back up the cave.

Catron and the others were caught flat-footed. Only White tried to act quickly. He leaped ahead and collided with Sillcott, and fell.

Vencel went after Speer. The light jerking on the walls ahead seemed far away. Vencel's head began to pound immediately from the exertion. He forced his bad hip to work. On the turns he staggered into the walls. Someone was coming behind him with a light. Whoever it was used his head; he tried to keep the beam directed low where it would give Vencel the greatest help.

Stumbling past the dead rats near the stores, Vencel heard Raven's voice, "Keep going!"

Now Vencel's eyes were blurring again. His legs were heavy. He was not running, only stumbling on, gasping for air. He could see that Speer was doing no better, but he was still ahead. The lieutenant passed the tools leaning against the wall. When Vencel got that far he grabbed a pick, holding it low against his right leg.

They neared the chamber. Speer still had enough lead to get to the detonator and end Blue Peak as the enemy meant it to be ended. When they stumbled into the room Vencel threw the pick underhand. It struck Speer behind the knees and tripped him. He was getting up when Vencel leaped, knocked Speer to his knees again and got him by one leg. He could not hold on. Speer smashed his free foot into Vencel's head, jarred him loose, and crawled on.

There was a shot, a rocking sound that churned around the walls and boomed away toward daylight. Speer fell on his stomach. He inched ahead, still trying to reach the detonator box. Raven shot again. Speer was quiet then, a few feet closer to the goal than the slight, clean-shaven man beside him who had tried to reach the plunger when the gas first drifted in.

"Out . . . go out . . ." Raven said thickly, and then he fell across Vencel's legs. Vencel heard the others coming. He heard Sillcott say, "Don't rush. Stay low where the air is better." That was the last Vencel remembered.

He came back to life near the air hose. Dr. Runyan was saying, "Heart trouble? Hell's fire, man, you came out of it quicker than Vencel, didn't you?"

Vencel struggled to a sitting position. Raven was slumped against the wall, with Dr. Runyan kneeling by him. The cavern seemed to be full of men.

Vencel heard a strange voice say, "Damn you, Julius, you know I ought to court-martial you!"

"I suppose so, General."

"Of course, I didn't actually order you *not* to make the attempt, did I?"

"No, sir."

"And it worked."

"Yes, sir."

"But it was an idiotic risk. It was not even a calculated risk. It was insane. You admit that, Julius?"

"Well, in a way."

"In all ways! But it did work." Hillton cleared his throat. "We'll talk about this at your headquarters."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

VENCEL CARRIED HIS COFFEE from the mess tent and sat down at a table beside Raven and Trichak. The dirty color above Blue Peak was fainter now. Sillcott had not shut off the weather-wrecker completely. He and his men were in the cave, feeling their way toward things they would understand fully before long.

From Catron's headquarters came a burst of laughter.

"Love feast," Trichak said. "It's all right to ignore your superior officers if you hit the jackpot."

Guards stood at the corners of the hospital tent. Two of the four men from the cave were inside. They should recover, Dr. Runyan had said. The other two were dead.

"The detonator was ready to work," Raven said. "All those cases were full of T.N.T., except one special one. That contained apparatus to set the whole works off. The gadget Saunders was uncovering would have done it." He was silent for a while. "I guess young Silvers paid off his father's death, all right."

"You've ordered Silvers to be released?" Vencel asked.

Raven shook his head. "Not yet. I may later this evening, after I've talked to him."

Vencel said, "I never suspected Speer."

"To the last he made no mistakes," Raven said.

"I remember now when I found the jawlifter he had walked several steps away with his back turned. He knew it was in my creel. He probably put it there."

"He could have," Raven said. "We may never be able to prove it. Speer was the rare combination of an intelligent man and a man of quick action. He shouted at White not to kill Mrs. Saunders. I think he knew she would not talk. Collins was different. He was a weak link. When it was obvious that his part was done, Speer chivvied Private Torchman into shooting him by starting the firing himself.

"It was White's .45 that killed Harper. When the guns were issued several months ago, the new models, Speer made an immediate switch. White paid no attention to the serial number. He learned to know the gun as one learns to recognize his own shoes, never knowing what's stamped inside them. All the time he was carrying a pistol that was never issued to anyone in this organization. Where Speer got it from I don't know. In time I'll trace that down, of course."

Raven looked steadily at Vencel. "You see how far ahead the man was planning? Not for Harper specifically, of course, but for any emergency. Harper became an emergency. He discovered, I think, the nature of the pump housing. We found his prints all over the metal. Apparently, he did not try to look inside. The place was being watched so closely that Okie could take no chances on moving the radio, if it was inside at the time, and neither could he take the risk of killing Harper at the filling station."

"Mrs. Saunders made no bones about that with me," Vencel said.

"The time was better," Raven said. "Catron let only one patrol sedan pass all the time you were there. He made bait of you, Vencel. The sedan went past. It should not have been back for perhaps three quarters of an hour. The Saunderses had been watching you from their window. The woman took the chance. She had good odds. I don't know where they intended for us to pick you up later, maybe in the canyon."

Trichak nodded. "It was a sound play. They knew the little transmitter had been discovered. Okie took a powder, and the old lady went out to chop you into hamburger. Among other things, she may have been a little sore at you, Vencel, for fouling up their work."

"To get back to Harper," Raven said, "when he took off, Okie signaled the fact by means of the signs against his garage. There was a desperate need to stop Harper, who knew among other things, that Okie had at least one T.N.T. bomb designed to put on a car. The night after you left the tourist camp, Vencel, one of Major Bowman's men saw Okie go up the old logging road and come out again.

"Later, the man went up the road looking for a transmitter. He knew your car and why it was there, so he paid no attention to it. But when Harper saw it, he made a routine check. He went on up the hill afterward. Speer was waiting near the jeep. He hadn't driven away, Vencel, when you heard his engine. Maybe he faked with the motor, or even drove a short distance down the road and then walked back.

"Speer knew that no traffic would be allowed to start up while the dozer was working and that nothing coming down could get by it. He was gambling that Harper would use the logging road. He had to gamble. It was his only chance to stop Harper.

"We established the point of firing by the angle of penetration of the bullet into the tree where Trichak found it, by Harper's height and other factors. The evidence indicated that Speer had knelt or lain at the edge of the road, firing when Harper was in easy range.

"You were positive, Vencel, that you heard no engine close immediately after the shot. You were right. Speer coasted down the hill, I'm sure, turning on the motor only when he was close to the three-gear pool. On the way he threw the .45 aside. Forrest found it. It had been issued to Lieutenant White. Perhaps you never knew it, but White had been on the hill that day himself, checking some old prospectors' holes for Catron."

"No, I didn't know it," Vencel said. "When you told me not to ride up the mountain with anyone you gave me a scare about White."

"I trusted no one," Raven said. He went on with his story. "Speer stopped at the three-gear pool and talked to Radetsky about checking out a sedan. They were old friends. All at once Speer pretended to hear a shot. He even half convinced Radetsky that he too had heard it. Then Speer hurried back up the hill, going around the dozer at the turn-out, arriving shortly after Trichak and I did.

"A private named Martin was sentry on the front ridge at the time. It was only a few minutes before his relief was due. His estimate of the time of the shot and yours, Vencel, were very close together. Radetsky was way off. I kept questioning him. He began to falter. You understand, he was honest. His death proves that.

"Each time I drove down the mountain I fired a .45 where Harper was killed. The sentries on the front ridge heard it every time. On three occasions I posted men on the logging road where your car had been. They heard the shots also. Glassner assured me that the dozer would not have covered the shots from anyone removed some distance from the road machinery."

Raven shook his head slowly. "Not once did anyone at the three-gear pool hear my shots. There is a ridge that apparently cuts off sound in that direction. The sentries kept reporting the shots. Catron assigned Speer and White to investigate. Speer must have caught on at once, for he knew that I was questioning Radetsky every day.

"Radetsky would finally admit that he must have been mistaken. Speer knew that. One day he helped the sergeant check the sedans for bombs. He clipped a bomb on one of the sedans. We found a clip and part of a lead in a wrinkle of the hood. Again, the wire came from one of the junked cars behind Saunders's place."

Raven bore a pained, puzzled expression when he said, "You realize that much of what I said is conjecture. I am not given to it regularly by any means. This time I had no choice."

"It reads out tight enough to me," Vencel said.

"But it is not. I had nothing. Catron would not have listened, particularly after I prevented him from getting his hands on Saunders. Perhaps telling him would have served only to warn Speer. So I did something that made me wonder at myself. I got the light rifle and waited in the boat. I was certain Speer would try to warn the men inside the mountain. With Okie gone he was the only outside hope left. He knew that even if we did not.

"I was ready to kill him. If he knew, and he must have, he gave no indication of the fact. When we reached the chamber I had him covered with my gun inside my pocket. He made no move. None of us could move quickly that first time in while the gas was still dissipating."

After a long silence Raven said, "I regret that I had to kill Lieutenant Speer. It was against all my principles." He drank the last of his coffee and walked away quickly.

Trichak said somberly, "It wouldn't have troubled me at all to kill a dozen Speers. My people are from the Old Country, Vencel—like yours. A lot of them have been massacred." He rose and put his cup beside the one Raven had left. He walked after Raven.

For Vencel it was done. He knew it was only starting for Raven and Trichak and others like them. They would continue their patient research, putting the little brush strokes on a canvas called Evidence until a picture was complete; and it would not be a picture that Americans would want to hang in their living rooms. They can't beat us, Vencel thought, as long as we have Ravens and Trichaks and men like Sillcott, who will never be a friend of mine; and men like Catron, who used me as expendable bait, but who was willing to make bait of himself when the chips were down. There were others too: Bowman, hard and uncommunicative; General Hilton, who knew when to reverse his field adroitly; and the whole tough crew of men who had jumped to Catron's orders.

Vencel sat on the darkening hillside until he became aware of cold. It was an odd sensation when the sweat on his shirt began to chill him. All around him there was a change that was almost imperceptible. He stared at Blue Peak. The last of the light showed a clear sky above it, but as he watched it began to blacken.

Sillcott at last had turned off the weather-wrecker.

When Vencel went toward his tent rain was sweeping across the lake. It struck the hill gently, riding a cold wind. It sank into the parched ground. Vencel thought he heard the land give a long glad sigh.

He stopped in front of his tent. Men were standing in the rain. He saw White come out of headquarters and take off his shirt. The lieutenant stood there with his blistered face raised to the sky.

THE SECRET WEAPON OF AN UNSEEN ENEMY...

Vencel had known the mountain when he was a boy. He had climbed it, hunted on it, fished in its streams. But when he came back, he found the mountain a place of swiftly spilling blood and sudden death. Vencel turned into an angry, vengeful man, and he swore to flush out the terrifying menace of Blue Peak.

But no man alone could fight the barbarous enemy hidden deep inside the mountain. So Vencel joined the team of army brass, FBI agents, and the nation's top scientists — all of them caught up in a desperate hunt for the most devastating weapon ever devised for the destruction of mankind . . .

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